

It's Hard to Explain

by Sarah the What

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Summary: Jack is a boy suffering from memory loss that would be willing to do anything to remember his past, and Hiccup is his new friend who would be willing to do anything to forget his. During their many adventures involving dangerous bikes, cute girls, and distant parents, both boys learn through each other that they can't continue living their lives in the past.

## 1. This Is Going to Be a Long Summer

**\*\*So, I decided to write a thing, and I hope everyone enjoys it.  
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Just want to point out that, yes, this fic will be written entirely in first person. I've never seen one written like this before, so I decided to accept the challenge and see what I could do. I also just naturally write better in first person too, so.

If there's any confusion, the narration bounces back and forth between Jack and Hiccup, and you can tell when it's changing narrators by the break in the text. Hope that's not too confusing!

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Everything's black.

I'm awake and conscious, capable of feeling the world around me silently moving and shifting, but my eyesâ€¦ they won't open. I know I'm not supposed to be in the dark like this, unable to see anything, but my eyelids feel like they've been sewn shut. All I can see is darkness, pure and horrifying darkness. The longer I don't do

anything to make it go away, the more it wraps around me, swallowing me whole, making me feel small and vulnerable and weak.

The calmness I had felt only moments ago is suddenly replaced by fear. I can feel comfort being clawed away by the darkness, hooked fingers wrapping around my throat trying to suffocate me. I want to fight back, make this feeling stop before it gets worse, but I can't move, can't defend myself.

I don't like the darkness.

What is this? What is it called, to be afraid with your eyes closed?

Oh, yes. I remember the word now.

A nightmare.

It takes all my strength, and I know my fear plays more than just a minor role in it, but I somehow manage to open my eyes. I'm instantly blinded by a white light, causing me to recoil, going briefly back into the darkness as to get rid of the glare. By doing this, I feel fear taking me over again, so I fight back, trying to wrench my eyes back open. I can't go back into the darkness, not after discovering that it isn't my only option.

My eyes eventually adjust to the light, and I'm able to see my surroundings. White walls, white ceiling, white floor. Even the door is white. There's no windows that I can see. A painting of an odd structure riding waves sits on the wall across the room from me, the wooden frame, of course, white. What is that structure called? I can't seem to- oh. A boat. It's a boat.

I notice two chairs, more of a beige color than a white, I suppose, sitting in the corner, empty. I feel a peculiar feeling begin to form inside my chest, causing something inside of me to feel kind of off - not there? I don't know, but staring at those bare chairs makes me feel - ugh, what's the word?! Why can't I remember these simple words?

Oh. That's it.

Lonely.

Something inside of me starts to quicken at the realization of this odd, new feeling. I suddenly feel vulnerable all over again, but I can't explain why. Those chairs are threatening. Why do I feel so -

I hear a sharp reparative beeping coming from my other side, causing me jolt. I look down to see - oh my God, what \_is that?\_ I stare at the limp, white figure lying next to - me? Wait, is this thing buried under all these white sheets - \_me?\_ And that thing - that strange-looking figure with five limbs protruding from it - is that - is that a \_part of me?\_ I stare down at it, and with thinking one simple command - move - one of the smaller parts curl up. I don't know why, but this sends a warm sensation to pulse through me, causes me to forget that loneliness I had felt earlier.

I know what this is. It's my hand. Yeah, that's the word. My \_hand.\_

And this. This mass under the blanket. It's my \_body.\_

I feel this sudden, odd awareness, not of my hand or my body, but rather of myâ€| myâ€| oh wow. My \_face.\_ I completely forgot about my face! Without thinking, my hand moves up and touches it, and I feel everything. My \_nose.\_ My \_eyelashes.\_ My \_cheeks.\_ My \_lips\_. I don't know where the words come from or how I could possibly know them before now, but as soon I feel each separate feature, they come pouring into me, like I had always known them.

My hand lands on my lips again, and I feel them move under my touch, startling me, but I resist the urge to remove my fingers. I recognize this feeling, the position that my lips are forming into. The corners are high, moving into my cheeks, causing them to bunch up. My eyes, like my cheeks, bunch up a bit too, mostly from underneath. Without even having to think, the word comes to me.

A smile.

The beeping that startled me from before registers in my ears again - oh my God, I nearly forgot my \_ears!\_ - and I turn towards the sound. That's when I come face to face with dozens of bright screens, flashing unreadable words at me, and hundreds of unrecognizable tools and machines and pumps, and the more I stare at them, the more I feel that smile on my face begin to disappear. It isn't until I notice the cord - small and transparent - coming out from one of the machines, snaking its way through my sheets, andâ€| wait. Is thatâ€| it'sâ€|

It's going \_inside of me.\_

The beeping from one of the machines starts to speed up, but I ignore it. All I can seem to register is the fact that a tube is actually sticking into my arm, and I hadn't realized it until just now. I can feel it inside me, and I hate it. I want to yank it out, but I can't. That familiar feeling from before washes over me again, and the beeping is going crazy, and I hear something from outside the door - soft but quick - getting closer and closer, and my breathing is quickening, and I don't know what to do.

I'm scared. My eyes are wide open and I'm surrounded by all this white, yet I feel that same fear and darkness from when I had my eyes closed.

A sound comes from the other side of the room, and I look up to see a middle-aged woman wearing a light pink uniform making her way hurriedly towards me. I jump in my seat, surprised by her unannounced presence, which causes a sharp feeling like needles to pierce into my forehead. She notices my discomfort, the fear I feel at the mere sight of her. She puts her hands up slightly, I think in attempt to calm me.

"It's alright, dear," she says in a near whisper. "I'm not here to hurt you. It's okay."

I want to trust her - I know I \_should\_ trust her - but I can't completely. She looks sweet, like she does care for my well-being, but by the way she seems to know how to work the machines tells me she's the one that stuck this rotten cord into me.

"Does it hurt anywhere?" she asks after I start to calm down.

I open my mouth to answer, but nothing comes out. As she continues to stare at me, waiting for a reply, I start to panic. I know what I want to say - the words are on the tip of my tongue - but why won't they come out? She's squinting her eyes at me, as if she's trying to read my mind, but all I can do in response is gape like a fish.

What is this? Why can't I talk? I know I can talk. She was talking to me earlier, so that must mean I can do it too. Why is nothing happening when I open my mouth though? Whatâ€¦ what is this? What is \_happening?\_

"Can youâ€¦ not talk?" I hear her ask me.

My first instinct is to nod my head, so I do just that. She shows she understands this simple gesture by nodding back and writing something down on her clipboard. I want to ask her what she's writing, but then I remember I can't talk.

"Does it hurt?" she asks me again.

The pain in my forehead becomes obviously apparent to me again, so I nod.

"Where?"

I move my hand from my side and touch my forehead, hoping this will answer her question. She seems to understand by the way she nods and writes something down on her clipboard again.

"Here," she says, placing the clipboard down and grabbing one of the odd tools from the counter beside me. "This will make you feel better, sweetie. Just give it a few minutes and you'll be fine." She takes the tool - it's long and has a sharp needle sticking out of one end of it - and slides the point into a small bottle, pulling out the liquid from inside. I want so badly to speak, to ask her what that bottle and tool is, and what she's doing with them, but, more importantly, I want to ask her who she is, where am I, andâ€¦ who even \_am I?\_

Before I can get her attention again, maybe to ask her these questions somehow through simple gestures, I notice the people standing in the doorway.

The tallest one - a man - stands with his arm around the shoulder of the smaller woman positioned at his side. She has her hands drawn up to her mouth and her eyes are staring at me, filled with shock and evenâ€¦ are those \_tears?\_ They both have similar brown hair, only the woman's is darker and longer than the man's. And even the man. He's staring at me with such confusion, yet he seems maybe more happy to see me than the woman is. She looks more fearful than anything, and for some reason, this makes something in my chest ache. Why is she afraid to see me? Do I \_scare\_ her?

My eyes move down, and that's when I notice the girl. She's tiny in comparison to the two adults, whom both stand behind her. She's probably around the age of eight or nine, but what do I know; I don't even know how old I am. She has the woman's same long, dark brown hair, falling over her shoulders and on top of the white dress she's

wearing.

I look at her and I feel her eyes land on me. We're staring at each other - no - into each other. When I locked eyes with the man and woman, I felt nothing, just their stares, but as I looking into this little girl's big, brown eyes, I feel something, something I can't put a name to quite yet. And her eyes. Instead of having the look of confusion or fear in them, they hold something new, something different, something I've never seen in another person's eyes before now.

All of the sudden, my eyes begin to feel heavy and mind begins to blur, but not fast enough to notice the edges of the girl's lips beginning to move upward. The woman in pink beside me asks a question, but the words don't make it to my ears, because all I'm doing is staring at the little girl as she smiles at me.

And then I'm gone.

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I'm not awoken by my alarm going off or the sun peeking through my blinds, but rather the feeling of claws poking into my thigh. This method of being woken up doesn't really bother me, seeing as I've had a good five years to get used to it, but that doesn't stop me from pulling the covers over my head and letting out a groan of disapproval.

"Toothleeeeeeeeeess," I go, moving my legs around in an attempt to buck the cat off of my bed. "Stoooooooooop. I wanna sleeeeeeeep."

In response, all I hear is a deep meow from the other end of the bed. There's a brief silence, in which I let out a sigh of relief, but then I hear him start to meow like crazy, going in full scales without stopping, reaching octaves I wasn't even aware he\_ could\_ reach.

I rip the sheets off myself, sit up, and make direct eye contact with the black cat. His bright green eyes stare back into mine as his ears fold back on to the top of his head; he's trying to pull the cute card on me, and I'm going to have to admitâ€¦ it's working.

"WHY?" is all I say.

As if he understands what I'm asking him - which sometimes, I have to admit, it seems like he does - he walks across my lap and on to my cluttered nightstand. As I'm about to tell him to get down from there, since he's getting pretty close to knocking off the lamp, he perches right on top of the alarm clock, shining the lovely numbers of 6:45 at me.

I shoot him an irritated glare. "You woke me up fifteen minutes early, you know that?"

He lets out a small meow and paws at the clock, like he's reminding me of the time.

I let out a sigh and swing my legs over the side of the bed, running my hands over my face. "I could've \_really\_ \_used an extra fifteen minutes of sleep, bud. Really."

He jumps back on to the bed, it creaking a little under his weight, and makes his way on to my lap, purring loudly and rubbing his black coat against my chest. There he goes again, trying to pull the cute card on me and, of course, succeeding.

"Yeah, yeah," I go, letting a laugh leak through my sleepy grin. "Good morning to you too, bud. Now let me go get ready. Don't wanna be late."

He quickly jumps off my lap, like he understands I mean business now. Standing up, I begin to wobble my way on my one leg to my conjoined bathroom, Toothless following me, like he's making sure I won't lose my balance and collapse on to the floor - like he could break my fall, the little furball. I'm not really afraid of my right foot slipping and having my body drop to the floor anymore; after having this one leg for most of my teen years, I've learned how to balance on it like I'm constantly walking on a trapeze wire. It took a lot of time and patience, but, hey, I didn't really have any other option.

I decide I can take a longer shower than I had originally planned, seeing as that stupid cat of mine decided to wake me up early, giving me extra time. That idea doesn't last very long though, since I almost completely nod off while the warm water soaks my body. Oh well. It was worth a shot.

After hobbling out of the shower and toweling off, I make my way back into my room to get ready for the busy day ahead of me. While I put on my prosthetic leg, Toothless does his usual pouncing and pawing at it until I playfully swat at him, causing him to retreat to sitting on my dresser, waiting for me to finish so I can pick out some clothes for the day. I follow him once all my parts are attached, and pull on a pair of boxers, some old khakis shorts I haven't worn since last summer, and a sleeveless shirt. Toothless has already put it upon himself to nudge his way into my sock drawer, now using his sharp, little teeth to make holes in the toes.

"I've had about enough of you today, \_cat,"\_ I threaten him, snatching the ruined socks from his grasp. He knows I'm just joking though; he places his front paws on the ledge of the drawer, folding his ears down, motioning me to stroke his head. I do so, mumbling something about an adoption center, which makes him try to nip at my fingers, but I'm too quick for him.

I make a point of being very quiet as I descend down the stairs and into the kitchen. My house's floor plan is really whacked up, having my room upstairs, and my dad's room right next to the kitchen that's located downstairs. I guess it made sense when it was being built, but now, it's more of just an inconvenience, especially for the mornings when I need to wake up early.

I stick to my usual breakfast: a bowl of Cheerios with a glass of milk, maybe a slab of toast with jam if I have the time before Fish is due to pick me up. Toothless stares me down from the kitchen counter until I remember to pour him his cat nibble, which he thanks

me for by weaving through my legs, purring like a motor boat.

Fish arrives right at 7:30, but makes the grave mistake of knocking loudly on the door. I have to make a mad sprint to the front of the house, nearly slipping on the carpet lying in the foyer.

"Fish!" I hiss as I pull open the door.

"Oh, hey, Hic-!" he starts, but when he notices my strained expression, he stops. "What, why are youâ€¦ oh!" His hands quickly go up to his mouth as his brown eyes grow wide. "Oh gods, I'm sorry! I completely forgot, Hiccup!"

I let out a sigh. "Nah, it's fine. Justâ€¦ remember next time. I can't afford to wake Dad up. \_You\_ know how he getsâ€¦" Fish nods quickly, his eyes still opened wide. He knows exactly what I mean, considering he's had his fair share of sleepovers at my place, and a few of them have gone horribly wrong by one of us accidentally waking up my dad before 8:00. Definitely not a pretty sight.

"You ready to go then?" he asks, still whispering, but excitement seeping through his words.

"Yeah, let me just get my shoes," I tell him, pointing back inside. Toothless meows at me from on top of the living room sofa as I open the closet under the stairs and pull out my sneakers. By the look on his face, I can tell he knows he's about to be abandoned.

"Don't worry, bud," I assure him, patting him on the head. "I'll just be gone for the morning. We can play later, alright?" He answers me by batting away my hand, jumping down from the sofa's ledge, and darting up the stairs, probably to find sanctuary under my bed.

"Must be rough sometimes, y'know. Being a cat whose only friend is his owner," I hear Fish say sympathetically from the front door.

I throw him a look. "Don't give him an excuse for being a nuisance."

I lock the door behind me and the two of us make our way into Fish's old Civic parked on the curb. It smells a little like nacho cheese, and I'm a little confused by this, until I notice the cardboard container sitting right next to my feet. It has the remains of our nacho snack from a couple of days ago still inside.

"I think I've already told you this, like, oh, I dunno, \_fifty\_ thousand times," \_I\_ say, "but you really gotta clean out this landfill of a car of yours, Fish." I pull the bandana I have wrapped around my neck over my nose, and kick the container further under my seat, in an attempt to rid of its awful smell.

"Yeah, I know, I know," he replies under his breath. "I'll do it sometime this break, I promise."

"That's what you said during spring break."

"Yeah, well, you're not the \_only\_ one on my back about it now."

"Oh?"

"My mom's jumped on to the bandwagon recently too."

"Way to go, Mrs. Ingerman."

He shoots me a look as his car is brought to life, and I return it with a smile.

I don't know why either of us decided to do it, but Fish and I have pretty much sold our souls - at least for the summer - to my dad's old friend, Gobber, who runs a little lawn mowing/yard repair business during the summertime. What he does is hire out a batch of teen boys that want to make a few bucks, or just want something to do with all their newly found free time, and makes them wake up early to mow people's laws and trim people's hedges.

This is the first year Fish and I have decided to volunteer our time into this business. My dad had bugged me about it for the last couple of years, but he never really forced it, since he probably didn't believe I could even push a lawn mower to begin with, being as small and weak as I am. I had somewhat of a growth spurt during the school year though - if growing two inches and gaining ten pounds is considered a significant difference - so I guess I don't really have an excuse anymore. And besides. It was either pushing a piece of machinery around for a good four hours a day for four days out of the week, or babysitting my neighbor's five kids, the eldest being eight and the youngest two, every day of the week, being responsible for all the horrendous misfortunes those little devil-children chose to bestow upon me. You don't need to even know the kids personally to know why I decided to go with the lawn mowing job instead.

Since our town is kind of on the small-ish side, it only takes us a good twenty minutes to drive across town to Gobber's place. When we pull up to his driveway, which has a large white van occupying it with what looks like a couple of lawn mowers sitting in the back, I can see a group of other boys around our age all sitting on his porch, talking to one another and putting on their gear.

"Did you remember to put us as partners?" I ask Fish as we get out of his car. The last thing I need is to be partnered up with some guy that either a.) I don't know, or b.) hates me. This fear becomes even more real when I notice one of the boys - I think he's a year older than us - look our ways and roll his eyes.

"Yeah, don't worry about it," Fish tells me, slapping me on the back, making me almost fall on to my face. "I wouldn't leave you to fend for yourself."

I throw him a look. "Gee, thanks."

Right as we approach the porch, Gobber makes his way out to greet us and fill us in with instructions on what exactly we're going to be doing.

"We'll all be travelin' together in this here van, you lot," he explains in his thick Scottish accent as he guides us towards said van. "I'll be droppin' you 'n' yer partner off at yer designated house, 'n' there, you'll have a good couple of hours to mow 'n' trim 'n' do whatever yer supposed to do. At around, eigh, say 10:30, I'll



make me rounds 'n' pick each of ye up, then drive ye lot to yer next house, where you'll repeat the process. Once noon hits, I'll pick ye all up again, drop ye off here, and you'll all be free to go. Any questions?"

Everyone's silent, and Gobber, being the man who sticks to the schedule he's given, doesn't wait one more second to get us all piled into the van and on our way's to our first house. The eight of us are all crammed awkwardly in the back with the four lawn mowers and hedge clippers we're to use. Luckily, I'm squeezed between Fish and the passenger's seat, so I don't have to deal with making contact with one of the other boys. That doesn't mean, however, that I wasn't noticed.

"What's he doin' here?" a boy with thick red hair sitting across from me asks his friend, who snickers. At seeing that he has my attention, he smirks and says, "You better be clippin' hedges, Haddock. I'm pretty sure Gobber here doesn't want to have to deal with you being too weak to push a lawn mower and bein' chopped to pieces or whatever by it."

A few of the other boys laugh, and Fish tells them to all be quiet. It's Gobber in the end that yells at all of us to shut up, which we all do, since you don't not listen to a man of his size. As the other guys are all hushing up, looking a little frightened by Gobber's outburst, I notice Gobber shoot me a little sympathetic look from the driver's seat, and I feel this pain grow in my stomach. If there's one thing I hate, it's getting special treatment just because I'm smaller than the rest of the guys, or because my dad's my dad, whom plays a pretty big role in our town when it comes to business.

I look away from Gobber and, as I move to look down at my feet, I accidentally lock eyes with the red head boy from before. He shoots me this glare, and I quickly divert my eyes downward.

Something's telling me this is going to be long summer.

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After a couple of days of being in the - what did they call it? Oh yeah. The\_ hospital\_ - I'm told that I'm well enough to be allowed to see and speak to any visitors that come to visit me. The only problem with this is that, one, I'm still unable to actually "communicate" with anyone besides using gestures, so there goes me being allowed to speak to my visitors, and two, no one but that little girl comes to visit me; but I don't mind this. I discover that she's all the company that I really need.

Her name is Emma, and she tells me she's my little sister, making me her big brother. She's nine, and she tells me that I'm seventeen, so I suppose that makes me her really big brother.

I want to ask her why I'm here, but she always seems so pleased to see me, running in when she arrives and wrapping her little arms around me, whispering that she missed me so much during the night she had to spend alone. Then she proceeds to tell me about what she did

that day with her little friends from school, and I have no time or really any desire to interrupt her looking so full of life and excitement.

My parents, on the other hand, seem to have the opposite reaction to my presence. They stop by every day with Emma - only, when they're in the room, the little girl finds refuge in one of the beige chairs in the corner, not saying a word. It's very unlike her, but I never question her on it.

The man I've been told to call Dad usually does most of the talking, be it to me or the doctor accompany us at the time. We've never talked about anything particularly personal either; what's mostly murmured between the two men are large words I don't understand that Emma claims are medical terms I shouldn't worry about. However, even when a doctor isn't present, my father just tells me that they'll be letting me out of here anytime now, and not to worry about it. I'm honestly not that worried about it, since I wasn't even aware that there was anything to worry about, but I can't talk and he barely ever looks eyes with me, so I never have the chance to tell him this.

Then there's the woman I've been told to call Mom. For some reason, I get an abhorrent feeling in my chest when she's present, mostly when she's looking at me, which isn't very often. She stands beside my father, a grim look on her face as she looks anywhere but at the person speaking or, more normally, me. When she leaves, she usually whispers a soft goodbye, no eye contact made. She once kissed me on the forehead, during one of her earlier visits, but as she left that day, I heard her break into tears, collapsing in on my father only a couple of doors down. Ever since then, she's never attempted to make contact with me.

Somehow I'm able to ask Emma through gestures what their deal with me is, but she just shrugged and tells me not to mind them. All she would let me know was that I had been in an accident that resulted in me losing my memory, and that they were really worried and were afraid that I wasn't going to make it. I just learn to assume that they're shocked by the fact that I'm still here and don't know how to react to it. This reasoning is good enough for me.

Mostly though, it's Emma who visits. On one particular day, she brings with her a book she tells me she's borrowing from the library, which she also tells me is a place where they store many books for anyone to check out and read at any time, which I think is a funny, yet interesting concept. I make her promise to take me to one of these library places after I get out of here, and she crosses her heart that she will.

"But check out this book I got," she tells me, taking a seat on the side of my bed, pulling the thick book into her tiny lap. "It's all about this thing called 'folklore'."

I give her a confused look, and she explains.

"Folklore is, like, stories and legends that people say aren't real, when really, they are. Well, at least I think so." I chuckle at her determination at being right as she peers down at the book, flipping from page to page, appearing to be looking for something in specific. "Like this guy!" she suddenly announces, flipping the book around so

I can see.

I lean forward in my bed to see a pencil drawing of a rather large looking fellow carrying a bunch of odd-looking toys in his wide arms. I look up at her with an expression that asks her to explain.

"You don't remember Santa Claus?" she asks, looking bewildered. I just shrug, feeling a little embarrassed by this, but she gives me one of her sweet smiles in return, the corners of her eyes crinkling up as she does it. "It's okay. I didn't really expect you to remember him anyways. He's this guy that comes during Christmas - do you remember what Christmas is?"

I shake my head.

"Ohâ€¦ wellâ€¦ it's this day during the month of December that people celebrate for some reason. I think it has something to do with Jesus? I dunno, but what I do know is that all the kids get tons and tons of presents! And do you know who gives them those presents?"

I shake my head again.

She pulls the book up again for me to see and points at the man she earlier called Santa. "This guy right here! He spends every day of the whooooole year making thousands on top of thousands of toys to give to every kid in the world on Christmas!"

I feel my eyebrows rise up to my forehead, feeling impressed by this task that even I think sounds impossible. I want to ask her more about the man - how he does something like that in one simple night, and how he gets from house to house - but I can't get the words out. I suppose I'll just have to somehow ask her if I can borrow the book to read after she leaves.

Emma flips through some more pages, her eyes moving rapidly from left to right, like she can't even keep up with herself. She finally lands on something she likes, because she flips the book back to where I can see and points at what appears to be a drawing of a small rabbit surrounded by dozens of colorful eggs.

"This is the Easter Bunny!" she tells me. "He's kinda like Santa, only he comes on Easter. Do you remember Easter?"

I shake my head.

"That's okay. It's kinda like Christmas, only you have to search for the eggs the Easter Bunny leaves outside rather than being given presents. I think it also has something to do with Jesus, but I can't be sure. Anyways. He's pretty cool. He gives kids chocolate, which is yum yum yummy!"

Her visit with me that day goes on like this; her flipping through that book that's almost too large for her to carry in her arms, her round face lighting up instantly as she finds something that pleases her. She shows me each folklore's picture, explaining to me who they are, telling me stories to make them seem more real. She tells me about the Tooth Fairy, a little woman that comes during the night and takes children's lost teeth, replacing them with quarters - how strange. She tells me of the Sandman, a man who conjures up what she calls "dream-sand" that allows children to fall asleep and have sweet

dreams - how even more strange. The list goes on, picture after picture of odd-looking men and women, animals and creatures I've never seen before. They're all pretty interesting, considering my state and not being able to remember any of them from my own childhood.

One in specific catches my attention though.

She almost skips him entirely, but when I catch a glimpse of his white hair, his bizarre looking wooden staff, I place my hand on his page, signaling for her to stop flipping.

Her eyes meet mine, and then she looks down at who I've stopped on.

"Jack Frost?"

I grab the book from her, moving the picture closer to me so I can observe the details of it. He's a young boy, maybe around my age, and his hair is white like the ice designs coming from his pale fingertips. His bare feet walk upon a frozen lake, and snowflakes surround him as he looks off into the empty, dark night.

"You know," I hear Emma say as I continue to take this boy in. "Jack Frost does kind of remind me of youâ€|"

I look up at her quickly, giving her a confused look.

"Well, yeah," she goes on. "You both have the same white hair, and even your eyes are blue - I mean, I think his eyes are blue. It's kinda hard to see them in that picture. But he's pale andâ€|"

I don't hear her go on with her reasoning on why this Jack Frost character and I are similar, because it's suddenly hits me thatâ€| well, that I don't even know what I look like. I've been sitting in this bed for nearly a week now, and not once have I even asked myself what I look like to other people. Is my hair really white like Emma claims? How could that be? My parents and even my little sister here all have brown hair. And blue eyes? They all have brown! How is that even possible?\_

I look down at my hands to see that, yes, they're what would probably be considered pale. Comparing them to Emma's peach colored shade, I look almost paper white in comparison. I grab a lock of my hair and pull it down to where I can see it crossing my eyes, and there it is. White. White as snow. White asâ€|

White as frost.

Emma has stopped talking by now. Her gaze is fixed on me, a concerned, yet curious expression held on her features. I can tell she wants to know what I'm thinking, so I decide to try and tell her in words she can understand.

I point to the young boy in the book, tapping on specifically him several times. When she nods her head, telling me she understands, I points at myself and open my mouth and try to speak.

"J-J-"

Emma's eyes grow large as she sees what I'm trying to do. She sits up on the bed, leaning towards me like she's beckoning for me to finish my thought.

"What?" she asks. "J-J-. What are you trying to say?"

I take a deep breath and practically stab myself in the chest, my eyes squeezed shut in concentration.

"J-Ja-Jaaa-"

"What? Ja- what?"

"J- Ja-ack-k."

She takes a sharp breath inward, falling back on to her bottom next to my covered legs beside her. Her eyes remain wide as she stares at me, like she can't believe what she has just heard. I don't blame her; I can barely believe it either.

I lick my lips and point at myself again. "J-Jack."

That smile I've learned to love appears on her face again as she calms down. She points her tiny finger at me and simply says, "Jack?"

I nod my head. "Jack."

"Youâ€¦ you wanna be calledâ€¦ Jack?"

I nod again, this time letting a laugh escape my lips.

She laughs at the foreign sound, since that's the first time I've ever outright laughed while I've been here - I've chuckled, I've even giggled, I'll admit. Laughed though. Never. Well, not until now.

"Okay," she says, still shooting me her warm smile. "You can be Jack. But not Jack \_Frost\_. That'd be too weird."

## 2. Are You Underestimating Me?

**\*\*Wow! I had a great response to this! \*\***

Thanks all you beautiful people oh-so much for all the lovely reviews! I seriously thought no one would give this story the time of day, but I guess I was wrong? But seriously, thank you all so, so much! Means a ton!

Oh, and a little comment concerning the story and potential ships, because I know you're all curious with where this is going, and I'm going to be completely honest with you when I say I HAVE NO IDEA. In all honestly, I'm just going to flow with it. I may lose readers because of this, but ah well.

That's enough of that though. To chapter two!

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"You almost done, Hic?"

Having somehow been able to hear Fish over the lawn mower in front of me, I reply back with a, "Yeah! Just one more sec!"

He signals that he had heard me by throwing me a quick thumbs up, and then points towards the gate separating the front yard from the back, saying something I can't hear. By the way he starts marching towards it, his hedge clippers in hand, I guess he's going to wait on the curb for me. Better finish this job quickly then. Not only do I not want to keep Fish waiting, but I also don't want to keep Gobber waiting when he shows up. That wouldn't end well.

Luckily for me, I'm already pretty much finished. I cut the lawn mower off a moment later and stand back to admire my work. It's already the third day of doing this kind of work, and I'm going to have to admit, I've learned to respect grass and people who mow it. It may not look like much - just pushing a large piece of machinery back and forth for hours on end - but man, after spending a good five hours this week doing just that, I've learned to see it as more of an art form.

Gods, I'm so glad I have Thursday and Friday off after today. I think I'm going a little crazy because of this grass cutting.

Taking one last look at the freshly cut lawn, I grab the mower and push it through the gate and into the front yard. Fish is already sitting on the curb, taking a long drink from his water bottle. When he hears me approaching - which isn't really that hard with that loud piece of metal in tow - he throws me a smile.

"Just one more house," he says, the spout of his water bottle still in his mouth.

"Just one more house," I say back. I plop down next to him and take my water bottle out. I only have about a quarter left after I take a swig from it, so I remind myself to get it refilled in the van once Gobber gets us.

"Whatcha wanna do once we're done today?" Fish asks me after a minute. "I feel like we should do something special, since it's the end of our first week of havin' jobs."

"I dunno," I say. "Go home and sleep?"

"But that's what you've been doing every day this week so far!"

"Fine. Go home, take a shower, then sleep."

"Oh, haha, you're so clever, Hiccup."

"I try."

As Fish continues to pester me about after work plans, mentioning something about going to The Ring to get some lunch, I notice a group

of kids on bikes turn the street corner and start heading towards us. I'm admiring one of the bike's nice paint jobs - a reddish orange hue with blotchy, black stripes in various sizes covering the frame - when I realize there's only one person in this town that would have that kind of paint job.

"And if we do end up going to The Ring for lunch, we can try to sit in Astrid's section," I hear Fish continue to try to persuade me. "That way maybe you could kinda, sorta try to ask her if she wants to-"

"As great as that sounds," I interrupt, having barely heard a word he's said," I think we have bigger problems on our hands right now, Fish."

He shoots me a confused look, and I cock my head towards the three teenagers now approaching us. His face falls once he sees who they are.

"Don't listen to a thing he says, alright, Hiccup?" he tells me sternly, his joking tone completely evaporated from his voice. "He's just going to try and bring you down and you shouldn't-"

"Well, well, well. Look at what we have here," the thick boy riding the red and black bikes greets us as he skids to a stop. His stringy, dark brown hair is almost completely hidden under a lame bike helmet with two goat horns sticking out of it, in an attempt to look like a Viking's helmet. The two other teens behind him, whom I recognize as Ruff and Tuff - also known as the Thorston twins - also sport similar helmets, only their horns aren't quite as big as their leader's. I swear, some of the kids here take the fact that our school's mascot is the Viking too seriously.

"What do you want, Lout?" I hear Fish spit back at the boy, and I have to fight back a smile from peeling across my face. Fish may be a big sweetheart most of the time, but get on his bad side and, oh, you're in lots of trouble, my friend.

Lout leans forward on his bike's handlebars, his arms crossed as he shoots me this devilish grin that I've learned to hate since we were kids. "I was just wondering how two losers like you guys could possibly convince Gobber to let you work for him. Am I right or what, guys?"

"Yeah!" Tuff, the male twin, goes in agreement. "Gobber must have been real desperate this year or something."

Ruff, his twin sister, lets out a laugh, and I can feel Fish next to me about to speak up again, only Lout beats him to it.

"I mean, I get Fish and all, since he's big and stuff and can actually help out, but Hiccup? Wee little Hiccup Haddock here." He says this in his best attempt of a baby's voice, leaning over his handlebar and reaching out to pinch my cheeks, like he always does. I'm not really in the mood to deal with this kid's crap right now, so, without thinking, I raise my hand and smack his away from me, causing Fish to let out a sharp gasp. Lout's hand hovers in air for a moment as our eyes meet and I try and give him the hardest glare I can muster, which probably really isn't that terrifying, not going to lie.

Lout just smirks at this, crossing his arms again on his handlebar. "Nice try, Haddock, but you're going to have to try a little harder than that to scare me. Let's get outta here, guys. Don't want to give 'em the idea that we actually \_like\_ talking to them."

Once they're out of ear shot, I finally say what's on my mind.

"What is his \_deal?"\_

Fish sighs next to me. "I'd tell you if I knew."

"Have I even told you that we\_ actually\_ used to get along?" I say, and he shakes his head, looking a little astonished by this information. "Yeah, like, way, \_waaaaay\_ back when we were kids. Whenever our families would have a reunion or whatever, our parents would stick us together and we'd play and it was great! But then school started, and he turned into an asshole that likes to pick on me every time he gets the chance."

"I always forget he's your cousin," Fish says quietly next to me. "Your dads are brothers, right?"

I let out a scoff. "I don't even know anymore. All I know is that 'he's family' and that I need to 'treat him like it'."

"I feel like you're quoting someone."

"I am. My dad."

"Ah."

At that moment, I notice a white van making its way towards us and I let out a sigh of relief. If only Gobber had arrived a little earlier, than I wouldn't have had to deal with Lout proving his manliness to his thick-headed friends by pointing out the little amount of manliness I have.

I push the lawn mower into the back of the van as Fish hops in and heads straight to the water barrel with our empty water bottles. Once I have the mower all strapped in, I tell Gobber, and we're on our way to our next house.

"Where to next, Gob?" Fish asks, taking a seat in the gap between the driver's and passenger's seat, so he can talk to Gobber.

"You two know 'bout the ol' Root place, right?" he asks us as I jump over Fish and take a seat in the passenger's seat. "Place where ye lots parents always warned ye 'bout trespassin' on when ye were wee things."

"Yeah, that old, abandoned house out on the outskirts of town," Fish confirms.

"Why are we going there?" I ask. "No one's lived there since old man Mildew died, and that was a good five years ago. That place is probably, like, a haunted house now."

Fish shoots me a concerned look. "Wait. Are you telling me there's \_ghosts\_ there?"



I shrug. "I don't see why not. I mean, the old geezer did die inside the house, so I guess it'd make sense of his ghost still roams the halls of the place, haunting all the kids that go and trespass on his land. He probably has that old cane of his in tow too, ready to bash in heads or whatever."

Gobber, without taking his eyes off the road, smacks me on the back of the head, and Fish lets out a nervous laugh behind us.

"A new family's movin' in," Gobber continues to explain. "Got the place all nice and cleaned up too. Now it's up to you two to make the yard presentable."

"When are they moving in exactly?" Fish asks.

"Today."

"Today!?" I go. "And we're expected to have the yard all done before they arrive?"

"Ah, no, no," Gobber laughs. "I talked to the new owners and they're 'right with ye two boys workin' while they move things in. Just try 'n' get the front done first so ye not in the way of them bringin' in their things, 'right?"

"Fine. Alright."

"Got it!"

A good five minutes later, we arrive at our destination, and Gobber's right; the place actually doesn't look as bad as I remember. Fish and I sometimes used to bike pass Mildew's old place, after he had died of course, so we wouldn't have to worry about him running out and threatening us with his cane. Every time we did pass by though, I always got this weird feeling from it; the paint chipping from its exterior, those gaping windows staring down at us. Something about it just felt wrong, and I was never able to place it. Now though. I don't know, but whoever fixed this place up must have been a miracle worker of some kind, because now even I wouldn't mind living here.

"Ye boys got two hours," Gobber tells us as I unload the lawn mower from the back and on to the dirt road. "But, since the lawns pretty big, if ye need some extra time, that's 'right. Just remember what I said 'bout-"

"Getting the front done before they arrive, I gotcha, Gob," I finish for him, and he points at me approvingly.

"Good luck, boys."

"Thanks, Gob. See ya soon."

Fish is already heading towards the wild hedges as Gobber's van pulls away from the curb and heads down the dirt road. I push the lawn mower to the far corner of the yard, near this old oak tree that we used to like to climb as kids just to get on Mildew's nerves, and line it up with the edge of the grass. Better get started on this now. Two hours, when spent doing the same old thing over and over

again, can actually go by a lot faster than one would think, and I don't have much time to waste here.

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This is the first time I've ever laid eyes on another human being before - besides my parents, Emma, and the doctors at the hospital, of course.

I stand in front of the moving truck as my father makes his way across our new home's front lawn, towards a small boy with auburn hair who's turning off this weird metal contraption. My father, who's wearing a nice button down shirt tucked into his pants, looks oddly out of place next to this boy, who's sporting a white, sleeveless shirt, some baggy shorts, boots, and a baseball cap. Another boy, larger than the other with a mess of dirty blonde hair also hidden under a baseball cap, joins them as my father and the smaller boy talk.

I can't help myself. These are the two first people I've seen outside of the hospital, and I can't stop staring. I know staring is wrong - that's what Emma's told me - but I can't help myself. They look so close to my age. I wonder what their names are, what they're doing here, if they live in this small town, if I'll ever see them again.

"Jack?" I hear a small voice chirp behind me. I turn to see Emma standing by my side, her small box full of her belongings in her short arms. Like her, I have a similar box in my arms, filled with a couple of books I've been told I like, several thick disks that my father called "hockey pucks" which are part of a sport I apparently like to play, a snow globe given to me by a forgotten grandparent I'll never meet, and various other small items, too easily lost to put in one of the bigger boxes in the back of the moving truck.

"Yes?" I go in response, letting her know she has my attention.

"You okay? You seemed a littleâ€¦ I dunno."

I nod my head with a smile and slowly tell her, "I'm okay." Ever since that day I first spoke to Emma in the hospital, I've been getting the hang of this whole talking thing. I still struggle with most words, but I'm honestly just thrilled I can finally communicate with more than just gestures.

Emma nudges me with her head, returning my smile. "Let's go inside then, you goofball. Daddy told me where your room is, so I can show it to you so you can unpack!"

I nod and follow her as she makes her way through the yard, skipping and humming as she goes. I can't help but steal a glimpse at the boys again, but I quickly divert my eyes when I notice they're already looking back at me.

On walking through the front door, I suddenly realize just how big

this house really is. Emma had told me on the drive here that our parents had bought what she explained to me was something she called a "mansion". When I asked my father about this, he just laughed and said that it's not a mansion, but it's bigger than your average house.

"This is like a mansion," I say under my breath as I look up at the two-story ceiling overhead. There appears to be several odd structures hanging down from up there, and I remember those are called "lights" and that they illuminate dark places. Looking back down at eye level as Emma says something to me that I don't hear, I notice a semi-spiral staircase leading up to the second story of the house, where I assume our bedrooms are located.

Emma nudges me again, taking me out of my state of observation. "Let's go find your room, Jack!" she says, already running towards the stairs. I don't hesitate to follow her, suddenly becoming quite nervous, yet excited to see this place she keeps referring to as "my room".

The room is the first to the left in the hallway upstairs, and is about the same size as the hospital room I had been kept in earlier that week, only the walls are a light blue rather than a white, and there's a large window on the opposite end from where the door sits. The floor is wooden rather than tile, and the frame of what I assume is to be my bed and a bookshelf are already here.

"I'm gonna go put my stuff away, okay, Jack?" I hear Emma tell me. "I'll be back to help you when I'm done, I promise!"

"Okay," I say, but I don't think she hears me since she's already bolted out the door.

My room.

When I had been staying at the hospital, they always referred to the space I was kept in as "my room", yet it never really felt like mine. I learned that there were people before me that had lain in that very bed, overcoming sickness and disease, just as I had. Knowing that made staying there even more unbearable than it had already been.

This place though. This little room made of four walls, a ceiling and floor, two doors, and a window doesn't feel like "my room" back at the hospital. This is my place, and there's no one to share it with and no one that came before it or will be coming after it.

I like this room.

Feeling the weight still in my arms from the box full of my possessions, I walk over to the bare bookshelf and softly place each book on its shelves. I assume that what I'm doing is logical, considering it's called a book shelf and these are books. Once each book is placed side by side, I place the snow globe in front of them, as to keep them from sliding down. I shake it before I do this though, watching the white substance dance around the small village contained inside the glass dome. For some reason, watching the white substance that Emma told me is supposed to be something called "snow" makes me grin so much, my cheeks start to hurt.

After placing the rest of my belongings on the bookshelf and putting the box down on my bed frame, I approach the lone window. There's a ledged area cut out right in front of it, where I assume one can sit and read and look out from. I climb on to it and take a peek out the window, revealing a view of the front lawn I had been out on only moments before. I had expected to see the two boys and my father still chatting outside, but, to my disappointment, they're no longer there. I wonder where they wandered off to.

"Hey, C- I mean, Jack."

Turning away from the window and towards the voice, I see my father standing right outside the doorway, carrying in his arms what appears to be something I heard my mother refer to earlier as a "nightstand". He appears to be struggling to keep a firm grasp on it however.

"Think you can give me a hand here, son?"

"Okay."

I jump up and dash across the room, planting my hands, like his, underneath the structure. It's heavier than I expected, but with my father's help, we move it across the room and right beside the bed.

"You want to help me with bringing up the rest of your furniture?" he asks. "There's just a desk, a dresser, and a chair left, so not that much."

I nod my head enthusiastically, happy to be of help. Emma had told me that, because I'm a guy, our father may ask me to help him with moving furniture into the house, especially the larger articles. At first, I was a little anxious about this idea, since I'll admit that I don't feel quite as close to my parents as I feel I should be. When I had been in the hospital, I saw plenty of other children my age, even younger, alongside their parents, and the relationships I saw between them were very different from mine. My parents have proven to be the distant type, my father because he thinks I need some space to come to terms with the world around me, and my mother—well, I still don't necessarily know her reasoning for not striking up conversations or even locking eyes with me, but I know it's not normal.

Hearing that my father actually wants my help though, wants to work on a task with me alongside him; it makes me happy. It makes me feel almost normal.

So, for the next twenty minutes, we carry the last few pieces of furniture for my room up the curved stairs, which proves to be a real challenge at first, but we somehow manage. Every time we have to stop because his back is starting to hurt, I can't help but laugh a little and playfully point out how old he's getting, to which he always shoots me a grin and says something about how I'll won't be laughing one day.

Once we're done bringing in the rest of the furniture for my room, I ask him if he needs any more help with the other rooms, but he says it's fine.

"We're not supposed to strain you too much," he informs me, taking a look around my now completely furnished bedroom. "Don't want to break you, you know." He smiles at the last part, so I smile back, even though I don't necessarily understand how one can "break" another person.

He leaves after that, saying something about how I can maybe help my mother with dinner downstairs, but it doesn't register because Emma skips in, that beautiful smile of hers glowing on her childish face.

"Wanna go exploring?" she asks, taking my hand in hers.

I smile. "Okay."

She shows me her room, which has purple walls and two windows instead of one, and has all her furniture and stuffed animals in it already. After she tells me the names of each one, we move into the office across the hall from our rooms. There's only a desk and chair in it so far, but Emma says that our father has a lot of bookshelves for this room so he can store his "zillions of books". We then go downstairs and explore the living room, which is also fully furnished, minus a coffee table and television stand. The dining room next door has yet to be filled, but there's something about the emptiness of the large room that makes me want to spin around in circles. I don't fight the urge and I start to spin, and Emma joins in only seconds later. We're turning in circles, looking up at the ceiling, laughing, when I hear someone sternly say, "Stop it!" and I quickly stop, having a hard time from collapsing because of the dizziness overcoming me.

Standing at the entrance to the room is my mother, wearing an apron and her hair pulled back into a long ponytail. The expression her face doesn't seem to show that she's angry, like her voice sounded, but more concerned? I'm not sure if that's the right word, but it's the first that comes to mind.

"Sorry," is all I can think of to say back. I try locking eyes with her, but she quickly looks down at floor, avoiding my glance.

"It's not what I don't want you to get hurt," she tells me, then abruptly turns and walks out of the room.

I look at my surroundings, wondering how in the world I could possibly hurt myself when there's nothing to hurt myself on. Peering down at Emma with a questioning look, she just shrugs and asks me if I want to go explore the backyard patio.

Our adventure to the outside is cancelled however by our father telling us we can't because of the boys doing the yard work. As Emma lets out a groan of disappointment, I look out the window and notice the same two boys from before. The larger one has what look like to be a blown up pair of scissors in his gloved hands that he's using to hack away at the bushes with, and the smaller one is pushing that weird contraption around again.

"What is thing he's pushing?" I ask Emma after we retreat back upstairs. "The small boy."

"Oh?" she goes. "You mean the lawn mower?"

"Lawnâ€¦ mower?"

She laughs at my confusion. "Yeah, it's called a lawn mower, Jack! It cuts the grass."

"Soâ€¦ it likeâ€¦ the ground is getting â€¦ â€¦" I can't seem to find the word I'm looking for, so I move my hand up into my hair, shaping my fingers to look like scissors and pretending to snip pieces of my hair off.

"A haircut?" Emma guesses.

"Yes."

She glances out the window at the boy pushing the \_lawn mower\_ - wow, what an odd name for such a machine - and giggles, covering her mouth with her tiny hands. "Yeah, I guess it is like the ground is getting a haircut. I've never thought of it like that." Looking away from the window and back at me, she gives me this funny look I can't quite decode. When I ask her what's wrong, she simply says, "You really do look at the world a lot different now that you have to relearn everything, don't you? Like, everything must be just soâ€¦so\_ weird\_ in your eyes."

I shrug.

"I've lived my whole life knowing that that's a lawn mower and that it cuts the grass, and I've never really questioned it. But you. Wow. That must be really weird, huh?"

I shrug again, unable to think of a real reply. I guess, yeah, it is kind of weird, the position I'm in, having to relearn everything that normal kids my age learned so many years ago. I don't really know any other way though. This constant learning of new terms and words; this is my life now. And quite honestly, I don't half mind it.

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"I wonder who that kids was."

"Hm?" I look up from the plastic menu in my hands and at Fish, sitting across the metal table from me. He has his meaty legs kicked up on the empty chair next to him, playing with the bill of his hat as he looks back at me.

"The kid we saw while at Mildew's old place, remember?"

"Oh yeah." I look back down at the menu.

There's a beat, then Fish adds, "He had white hair."

"Yeah."

"That's kinda weird."

"Probably bleaches it or something," I say. "Hey, are you gonna order anything orâ€|?" I pass the menu his way, but he just waves it away, pulling the hat back on to his sweaty head.

"Hiccup, I've lived in this town since I was born, and I've come to this restaurant since I was nine," he tells me for the thousandth time. "Trust me when I say that I know what I want."

I shrug. "Suit yourself."

Placing the menu back down on the table, I lean back some in my chair and close my eyes, listening to the birds in the tree next to our table sing. Despite having to mow two yards today in this blistering heat, I'm going to have to admit that it's rather nice outside. That's something I love about The Ring, the restaurant that Fish and I and dozens of other kids our age go to to hang out and get our greasily unhealthy food fix. In the center of the lot there's the kitchen, and around that, going in - you guessed it - a ring shape, are a couple dozen tables, all outside with umbrellas providing shade. It's the perfect place to go and chill on a deadly hot day like this, when you still want to be outside, but not all gross and sweaty.

"Do you think he's in our grade?" I hear Fish ask, and I let out a sigh. So much for a relaxing afternoon, enjoying the sounds of nature. Fish is the last person you want to possibly have around if you want some peace and quiet I've discovered over the years.

"I dunno," I say, going along with it, my eyes still shut. "He looked a little older than us. Why does it matter?"

"No reason other than just wondering," he admits. "It's not like everyday someone new moves to Berk, y'know? Especially someone 'round our age."

"True."

My eyes snap open when I hear the sound of blades on concrete rolling towards us. As I turn my head in the direction of the sound, there stands a small, but somewhat muscular, blonde girl, her hands on her hips and roller skates on her feet.

"Hey, you two," she goes, smirking at us. "You guys here to bother me while at work or something? Better not get me fired, like last time."

"Nope! Not today!" Fish goes, shooting a smile her way.

"Surprisingly enough, we're actually here to \_eat\_," I add on, and she just rolls her eyes.

She flips out a little red notepad and matching pen, brushing her side bangs out of her pretty, round face. "Well, if \_that's\_ what you're here for, what'll it be?"

"The usual," Fish says.

She jots something down in her notepad, smirking again. "Got it. And you, Haddock?"

"I'll try the number seven today, please and thank you, miss."

She takes the menu from my outstretched hand after writing down my order. "I don't think I've ever had your scrawny ass order the same thing twice in a row, you know that," she reminds me. "Wish you just had a usual, like Fish here. Kinda annoying, if you ask me."

"Yeah, wellâ€¦" I lean my head back so I can see her from under the brim of my hat, and shoot her a smile. "You know me, Astrid."

She hits me right on the face with the menus. "Yeah. Sadly."

Before I can say any form of a comeback, she's off, gliding between tables and other waitresses delivering other people's orders. I watch her go, her thick legs pushing her body until she gets to the ordering station to tell the cooks our order. I hear Fish laughs next to me, taking a sip from his drink and saying something about how she "got me good" this time.

"You should ask her out," he adds suddenly.

"But she hates me guts."

"Oh, come on, Hiccup. She doesn't \_hate your guts\_. If she hated your guts, she wouldn't even give you the time of day, which she totally does! She justâ€¦ doesn't always appreciate your presence every time she sees you."

"Gee, Fish. You really know how to make a guy feel confident."

"I'm just saying you should make a move before someone else does, that's all."

"Says the guy who can barely get a sentence out when he's around \_his crush," I tease, throwing a salt packet his way. He deflects it with his hand, shooting me a look.

"That's not fair," Fish fights back. "I haven't known her for as long as you've known Astrid. I mean, how long have you guys known each other again?"

I let out a huff, folding my arms across my chest. "Sincewewereeight."

"Ah, I'm sorry. I don't believe I caught that."

I glare over at Fish, which he returns with a smug smile. "Since. We. Were. Eight."

"That's what I thought."

It's then that Astrid rolls up with our meals, both sitting on a turquoise tray balanced on her hand. I thank the gods for her superb timing.

"I got a usual," she goes, tossing the double stacked cheese burger with extra pickles and mayonnaise Fish's way. He snatches it in the



air, licking his lips at just the feeling of it in his hands. "And a number seven," she adds, tossing me my simple cheese burger with additional bacon bits. As we unwrap our burgers, I notice her look over towards the ordering station, like she's checking to see if anyone's watching her, and then slinks into a chair across from us.

"You two going to this weekend's race?" she asks. "I heard Lout's been working extra hard on this new trick where her pops a wheelie and has one foot on his handlebars and starts flexing or something egotistical like that." She rolls her eyes, brushing her messy braid over her shoulder. "What a perfect asshole, right?"

"We saw him earlier today," Fish tells her, sinking his teeth into his burger. "He got a new paint job."

"Oh yeah? What's it this time?"

"A reddish orange with black stripes," I tell her, still unwrapping my burger. The employees here that wrap these things are professionals at it, I swear. I usually end up just having to grab a chunk, peel, and hope for the best.

Astrid rolls her eyes again, resting her head in her palm. "How original. But are either of you two going to race against him? I would, but my baby's in the shop getting some new special wheels. They're supposed to make her faster. Super excited about it."

"I can't," Fish confesses with disappointment lacing his words. "My grandma's coming in this weekend, so my mom said I have to stay home and hang out with her."

Astrid then turns towards me. "And let me guess. You're still working on making your bike into some kind of masterpiece, right?"

I make a gun out of my hand and pretend to shot her with it. "Bingo."

"Oh, tell me, Mister Haddock. Will any of us mere mortals ever be able to lay eyes on the infamous Night Fury, or will we forever have to use our imaginations to pictures its beauty?" Fish chokes on some of his burger, and I shoot him a glare, to which he returns with an apologetic shrug.

"It's getting there," I tell her.

"That's what you said last time I asked you about it."

"But it really is getting there."

She lets out a dramatic sigh, leaning back in her chair to where it's pushed up against the half wall behind her, noisily kicking her skates up on to the table. "I really hope you're right about Haddock's skills when it comes to racing, Fish. It'd be nice to see someone other than Lout win for once."

I smirk in her direction, whipping ketchup from my chin. "Oh, so you can't even beat him?"

She narrows her light blue eyes at me. "He's really good,

Hiccup."

"Are you underestimating me, Miss Hofferson?"

"I dunno, am I? I've never seen you race, so I wouldn't know."

"He'll beat him," Fish interjects happily. "Hic really has been working a lot to perfect his bike, Astrid, making it super-fast and stuff. Lout won't stand a chance when Hiccup gets on to that race track." I raise my hand into the air, asking for an air high-five, and Fish delivers, bless his soul.

Astrid rolls her eyes, taking her skates down from the table, and stands up. "Well, I really hope you're right, Fish. It'd be nice to finally see Lout get smacked into his rightful place. Especially by someone like \_you.\_"

"Hey!" I go, trying to look offended. "What's \_that\_ supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what I said. See you two weirdos later." She smacks me on the side of the head as she rolls pass, almost making me lose my grip on my burger.

### 3. Had About Enough of Today

**\*\*Yeah, only one narrative for each boy today.\*\***

The next update may be some time away. I still have loads of planning for this story to do (got the beginning and the end all planned and some middle stuff, but nothing really official), so that's what I'm going to be working on for awhile instead of actually writing. Don't think this means months before the next update. Maybe just expect another update next Wednesday, at the latest.

Thanks for reviews and stuff, guys! I really appreciate it!

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For the rest of the following week after moving into the new house, things seemed to fall into a rather simple and comfortable routine.

I've learned that I like sleeping in; not too late, mind you, but late enough for my parents to have already departed to this place called "work" when I finally make my way downstairs for breakfast. Emma is usually already up and wide awake, finishing up her colorful breakfast of \_Lucky Charms\_ and orange juice while I slump through the threshold. Either she points to a bowl of cereal or slab of toast sitting next to her at the breakfast table, having gone out of her way to make for me, or she start's going on and on about the day's plans as I wobble around the kitchen, nearly missing the glass as I attempt to pour milk into it.

After finishing up our breakfasts, she helps me with cleaning our dishes, often resulting to at least one water-splashing war - in which I usually win - and then she guides me upstairs to get ready for the day. I ask her why we do this, considering we're not planning on leaving the house, and she tells me that it's not good to wear your pajamas all day, since it'll make you want to be lazy and get nothing done, which I understand. Although, at the same time, being lazy and doing nothing in my pajamas all day doesn't sounds so unappealing to me. Nevertheless though, I do as she says, since she won't let me leave my room if I'm not wearing something other than my flannels.

In the mornings, if it's not too hot out, we normally venture outside into our cozy, green backyard to play games. The competitions we have between each other during these odd children games Emma refers to as "Tag" and "Hide and Seek" don't often last long, seeing as the heat exhausts us rather quickly, but we're always laughing, bright smiles on our sweaty faces as we scurry into the house to get drinks.

She teaches me how to make homemade lemonade, which has to be one of the best things I've ever tasted, despite the fact that I can't remember a lot of food or drink's tastes. After filling our plastic cups to the rim, we store the pitcher in the fridge and make our ways back outside to read in the hammock our father put up for us under this huge oak tree. Emma often makes me read, telling me it'll help me with learning new words, and I don't mind this; I've discovered that I actually enjoy reading a lot more than I expected I would. Sometimes though, I ask her to read, since I enjoy hearing the words come from someone else's mouth every once and awhile.

A couple times, when I'm the one reading the books she brings out to enjoy, Emma falls asleep next to me, her small head resting on my shoulder, brown hair running over me. Occasionally, I'll continue to read on, sometimes out loud, other times in my head, but there are times when I stop and watch her. There's just something about the way her small chest raises and falls, the way her eyelashes quiver in the gentle breeze surrounding us, that makes me feel reallyâ€¦ well, really happy. I feel like, if I didn't have this blessed little girl around to escort me through this unfamiliar and strange world, I'd be utterly lost and confused. My parents seem to be too busy adapting to this new life we have in order to have time to help me get back up to speed with things, and asking friends for help is out of the question, seeing as, well, I don't have any friends. Emma just makes every object and idea, no matter how difficult it may seem to grasp, so easy to understand.

After a while, I carry her small body inside to lay her on the couch to sleep, getting her out of the dreadful heat. She never naps long though. It's usually when I'm making an attempt to make lunch for the two of us when she wakes from her light slumber to help me out and join me once we've finished.

Once our bellies are full and the dishes have been scrubbed clean, we pull out different "board games" as Emma as told me to call them, which make sense to me, seeing as they're exactly that: a game on a board. These games vary from day to day, going from guessing games such as Clue and Battleship, to games purely focused on strategy, like checkers and Sorry!. We're pretty consistent with playing one board game however, and that one's called Scrabble. We play it a lot because Emma tells me it's all about words, which is something I'm

obviously working on mastering. At first, it was frustrating beyond belief, since my vocabulary only extends to basic words, but with a lot of help from my smart little sister, I've really started getting the hang of using these newer, bigger sounding words.

One afternoon though, Emma decides to introduce me to a new game, saying that it, like Scrabble, will help me not only learn new words, but also help me learn to connect words with objects.

"Flashcards!" she cheers, raising a small rectangular box over her head. We're sitting in the middle of the living room, her legs crossed, and me leaning against the couch, wrapping my arms around a pillow. After throwing the box down in front of me, I lean in to get a better look.

"Flashâ€¦ cards?" I say slowly, giving her a questioning look.

"Yeah! Each one has an object on it, and don't worry, there's nothing \_too \_hard," she explains to me as she peels open the top of the case and pulls out small sheets of what look like paper. I notice that there are indeed sketches of various items on the surface of each card; the one I see on top has something I think is called a "dog" on it.

"I looked through them last night," Emma continues to tell me, "and I pulled out the really hard ones. Most of them looked pretty easy though. Wanna try 'em out?"

"How do you play exactly?" I ask, not just curiosity in my voice, but also pure excitement. Whenever Emma shows me a new game, I get like this. If there's something I love just as much as my little sister, it's playing games with her.

"You're supposed to tell me what each object is, silly!" she laughs. "Like this." She pulls the card from the bottom of the deck out and flashes it at me. "Tell me what this is."

I look over to see an oddly shaped object drawn upon it. Hm. Let me think about this. Wellâ€¦ it's long, like a cylinder, only the bottom portion of it appears to be thicker than the top. And, judging by this drawing, it's made of some sort of glass and is transparent and - oh!

"That's a, uhâ€¦ a bottleâ€¦ right? A glass one," I answer. When her lips peel back to form a smile, I feel a warmth inside my chest. I've learned that this feeling normally comes around when I've answered a question correctly. I think it's called something like "proud" or, rather, "feeling proud".

"Good job, Jack!" she congratulates me, slipping the card back into the deck in her hands and pulling out another. "Now tell me what\_ this\_ is."

I study the illustration on the card, letting every detail of it soak in, raking my brain for the appropriate word. This specific object she's showing me right now is very, very, very long and appears to be made of some soft, cloth-like fabric. There's a wild, colorful design on its flat surface, twisting and turning around itself as - wait a second. I know what that is!

"A scarf?" I ask. I've never physically seen one of these things, seeing how it's summer, and I've been told that there's no need for such an article of clothing during this time, so I hope I'm right and not just making nonsense up.

"Right again!" Emma says, that same smile from before appearing on her face again. "Wow. You're really good at this, Jack!"

We continue this game; her showing me a card and me studying it, soaking each one in just to tell her what it is. I end up getting most of them correct, but a few slip past me, leaving me irritated. Emma never shows any disappointment in me when this happens however, and I'm grateful for this. I'm already beating myself up pretty badly with this game, wanting to get each one right, so the last thing I need is to have her frustrated at me for being wrong.

"And what's this?" she asks, pulling out another card for me to decode. I study it, now lying on my stomach, resting my chin in my hands. Hm. Let me think about this. I've seen this object before, and I think it was outside - a part of nature, definitely - so that really narrows this down but what is it? It looks smooth? Yeah, that's the word. At the same time though, it doesn't wait does that even make sense? How can something be smooth and bumpy at the same time?

I reach out and take the card from her hand, pulling it right up to my face so I can see every last detail of it. Though there isn't much detail to see, now that I really look at it. It's a pretty basic object, doesn't have much going on. Shoot! I really feel like I should know-

All of the sudden, my eyes black out, leaving me in darkness as a piercing pain stabs into the back of my head. I'm not longer in the center of the living room with Emma, a pillow resting under my arms, but I'm more of in the middle of nothing. It's just cold, empty darkness surrounding me now, and as it creeps more around me, the pain in the back of my head becomes more agonizing, making me want to let out a scream for help. So I open and my mouth and-

In literally a second, I'm suddenly lying on the ground, only it's not on the shag carpet in the living room, like I had been expecting. This surface is hard and wet, pressed up against the back of my head, which I notice doesn't hurt as much as before. My eyes are open, but only as slits, so what I can see is blurred.

There's someone standing in front of me. They're crouched down, their face near mine. I can't make out who is it. Now they're getting up and wait. Where are you going? I hear a muffled voice say something, but I can't make out the words as the person runs away from me. As I attempt to turn my head, I feel a wave of exhausting come over me, and I have no choice but to close my eyes.

And the pain's instantly back. I reach up and grab the back of my head, trying to help take off the sharp pressure being applied to it by what seems like nothing, and curl into a ball as I let out an agonizing scream.

"J-Jack!?"

My eyes snap open, and Emma's large, light brown eyes stare back into mine. She's wearing a concerned look on her face, but that's all I'm able to observe before the stabbing in the back of my head grows immensely. I want to keep my eyes open, not wanting to fall back into the darkness again, but I can't fight it. I justâ€¦ can't fight this pain. My eyelids tighten over my eyes as I let out another cry.

"Jack!"

Arms wrap around me as I feel something touch the back of my head, surprisingly easing the pain a bit. I open my eyes to see Emma hovering over me again, my head resting in her lap as she puts something squishy and cold against the back of my head.

"What is-?" I begin, but I don't finish, because the pain is thrashing at me again, trying to get through whatever is placed between it and my scalp. I cringe, my eyes snapping shut as I feel something wet slide down my cheek.

"I-It's okay, Jack," I hear. "You'reâ€¦ you're gonna beâ€¦ gonna be o-okay." It sounds like Emma's voice, but I can't be sure, since I've never heard her speak in a tone like this before. Fingers are being brushed through my hair as her small voice continues to comfort me, acting as a shield from the torture. Water continues to stream down my cheeks as I grit my teeth, and I can feel my body shaking as the pain begins to fade and Emma leans over and kisses me on the cheek.

We continue to lay like that, my head resting in her lap as she strokes my hair and whispers sweet words to me. She's acting abnormally calm for a child of nine, but remembering the way she stuttered earlier - barely being able to get the words out of her mouth as she tried to help me - reminds me that she was probably just as scared as I was only moments before.

I don't know how much longer it is until the pain eventually fades, but we don't move once it does. Whatever Emma has pressed up against the back of my head is no longer as cold as before and has even produced what feels like water all over her legs and my hair. I keep my eyes closed as I ask her in a quiet voice, "W-What is that?"

"Huh?" she goes, not expecting to hear me talk I assume.

"What is that?" I ask again. "On my head. It's wet."

"I-It's an ice pack," she tells me simply. "Mommy told me thatâ€¦ well, if something hurts, you should put an ice pack on it. And by the way you were grabbing your head, I thoughtâ€¦ well, I thought maybe your head was hurting."

"So you went and got an ice pack for me."

Emma looks a little let down when I say this, her shoulders slumping at the words. By her expression, I can tell she's probably thinking she should have done something more, something that would be more efficient in making me stop feeling the pain I was enduring.

I help her feel better, just as she had done for me. "That was very

smart of you," I tell her, trying to smile. "It helped. A lot. Thank you."

She beams back down at me, only her eyes look a little hurt. I don't think anything of it though, because she leans down and kisses me on the forehead.

Once she's gone back to stroking my hair, the pain completely gone now, I decide to ask, "What was the object?"

She gives me an odd look.

"On the card," I explain. "What was it?"

Her lips part a little as she stares down at me. I can't tell if she's trying to decide whether or not to tell me, and I'm about to ask her again what it was, when she simply says, "A rock. It was a rock."

A rock.

I close my eyes, relaxing my body.

I should've known that.

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Well, \_this \_isn't working.

I sigh and fall back on to the cold, concrete floor, allowing my tensed shoulders to relax. The silver bike chain hangs lazily from my bike's back wheel's spoke, swaying a little as if to mock me. I'm tempted to snatch it up and hurl it across the cluttered garage, but \_man, \_I paid a good thirty bucks for that stupid thing and there's no way in hell I'm just going to throw it around like that.

It's Thursday, my first official day off from work, and the next big race is this Saturday. I've been sitting in my garage for the last couple of hours, Toothless accompanying me as I tinker away at my bike, trying everything in my power to make it better and faster than stupid Lout's. I bought this new chain, all sleek and clean - very unlike my older one - in hope of it increasing my speed, therefore my chances of winning. All I've gotten out of it though so far are dirty fingers and a dire need to just get out of this stuffy, overcrowded, and not to mention freezing garage. Maybe wearing a sleeveless shirt while inside a windowless room wasn't the best idea I've had today.

I look over at Toothless, carefully perched on a stack of forgotten cardboard boxes, lapping away at his paws. "There's no way I can race this weekend, bud," I tell him.

He stops licking himself and stares back at me, his large green eyes burning into mine.

"Don't give me that look, \_cat\_," I threaten him, throwing him a

nasty look. "Iâ€| ugh. I know I told Astrid and Fish I would, but really. I justâ€|"

Ah, who am I kidding. I've been making excuses to not race against Lout and the other guys since I got my bike back in the third grade, and here I am, fifteen and still a coward. It's not that I don't think my bike's not good enough to race, because I\_ know\_ it is; and I also know I'm a good enough racer to compete against those blockheads too. It's more of just the fact that those guys have been racing bikes since they were old enough to turn the pedals, where as I've been riding bikes since then as well, but not actually taking it seriously until I was about nine. That huge head start they have - already having fancy bikes all ready for racing - well, that's rather discouraging and extremely intimidating to me.

I get up from the cold ground and quickly loop the chain through the chainring, not bothering to make sure everything's all lined up and in place, because, quite frankly, I really couldn't care less right now. It's only about 7:30, so I have a good half hour to kill before it starts to get dark out, and what better way to kill that time than to go for a much needed and, not to mention, much deserved ride.

"Wanna go, bud?" I ask Toothless, getting up to press the garage door opener.

He gives me this look, growling ever so slightly.

"Don't worry," I tell him rolling my eyes as the garage door opens up and I grab my bike from its stand. "I'll work more on it tomorrow. I may not be able to race this weekend, but I'll get around to it someday."

He continues to give me this look, and I chuckle.

"Fine. I'll go by myself then," I say, mounting the saddle. "Just go claw on the back door or something. Dad'll let you in." And, with that, I kick off the ground and speed out of the garage, gliding down the curvy driveway and into the empty street.

I aimlessly ride around for a while, not really concerned with where I'm going. Berk's a small town, so if I feel like going home, all I have to do is look at my surroundings and get home from there. The fact that I've lived here my entire life just makes doing that even easier.

Normally, I love weaving in and out of streets in my neighborhood, familiar and unfamiliar, seeing all the fellow population doing their everyday evening routines. Some of my favorite things to see are parents coming home from a long day at work to be greeted by their excited children, little kiddie pools filled up with hoses being played in by chubby toddlers, joggers plugged into their iPod, their dog happily jogging beside them. The fact that the wind blowing through my hair feels absolutely incredible just adds to the many reasons why I love biking so much.

There is one street though that I always avoid. It's the street that Fish used to live on, before he got two little sisters and had to move to a bigger place a few streets down. Windwalker Drive is its name and, if I can help it, I try not to have to bike down that



street. There are just too many sad memories there.

The street lights begin to flicker on above me as I turn on to Astrid's street. I want to tell myself that me biking towards her place is just a coincidence - that I hadn't been thinking about it - but then I'd just be lying to myself. Every time I go out for a ride, I somehow find myself on her street, staring down the block at her lit house, knowing her room's the window to the far left on the second story, and that she's probably in there, doing whatever it is she does when she's alone.

One of these days, I swear it, I'll have enough guts to pull into her driveway, march up to her door, and ask her if she wants to bike with me. I've seen her bike on several occasions, throwing and catching barspins and kicking into a cliffhanger like a pro, and let me just say that it would be a privilege to be able to bike alongside her.

That's just a stupid fantasy of mine though. I mean, I don't know that many tricks, like she does. I'm more of a racer, focusing on speed and endurance rather than all those super cool and dangerous stunts, so I'd probably feel really lame if I were to bike with her; I'd just be cruising while she'd be being the total badass she is, no doubt.

And besides. She's \_Astrid Hofferson,\_ not only the toughest and most popular girl in our grade, but also by far the most beautiful - at least in my eyes. And, well, I'm \_Hiccup Haddock.\_ What girl in her right mind would want to bike with \_me?\_

I decide then to stop torturing myself and head home, since I notice the sun touching the top of the houses around me. The last time I stayed out after dark, my dad pretty much threw a temper tantrum and almost grounded me from being able to ride my precious bike for a week. The fact that I'm not wearing my helmet right now would just give him even more of a reason to be pissed at me, and that's definitely not worth the risk.

It takes a good five minutes to get to my house, and I happen to arrive right as the last street light turns on. As I pull into the driveway, I notice a white van sitting behind my dad's car. I guess Gobber's decided to pay us a visit tonight. Lovely.

After storing my bike in the garage, I enter the house through the conjoined door that leads straight into the laundry room, which then goes into the kitchen. Gobber's booming voice is the first thing I hear.

"Ye got to cut the poor boy some slack, Stoick," he goes in his thick accent. "So what that he isn't intoâ€¦ wellâ€¦ whatever it is you do, but he's still young. He's still got time to figure out who he is."

I stop in my tracks and hope neither of them heard me open and close the laundry room door. My dad lets out a heavy sigh, signally that, yes, they \_are\_ talking about me, which is just \_great.\_

"I know, I know," I hear my dad go as I creep closer towards the entrance to the kitchen, so I can hear them better. "He's justâ€¦ I can't help but feel he's wasting his time on that bike of his. I

mean, ever \_after\_ what happened to his leg a couple years ago, he still loves riding those damned things. It's all he puts his time into nowadays. He's even stopped hanging out with that Fish boy lately too."

"Well, if it makes ye feel better, they work together when they're with me," Gobber assures him.

My dad sighs again. "That's beside the point."

"Well, don't he have anyone else besides the Ingerman lad to be with? He's bound to have other friends, Stoick."

"There's the Hofferson girl, Archie's daughter, I suppose. But those two haven't hung out since they were kids, Gob."

"So, what ye tellin' me is that there isn't anyone else?"

"Besides Toothless?"

"The cat don't count."

"Then no. He doesn't have anyone else. But this isn't about his friends. I justâ€¦ just want him doing something better with his time, that's all."

"Ye can't control the boy 'n' what he does in his spare time. If he wants to work on that bike of his, he's goin' to work on it, whether ye approve or not. He's a stubborn one, wee Hiccop."

"So I've been told."

"Oi. Wonder where he got \_that \_from."

I hear my dad chuckle, but it's more of one of those dry type, like he's doing it more to be polite than because he actually thinks what Gobber said was funny. "But really. I justâ€¦ ah! I wish I could just \_understand\_ what makes him tick, you know? Understand \_why\_ he likes to spend his time messing with those bikes rather thanâ€¦ being more productive. I mean, there are so many things he could be doing with his free time! I offered him to be an intern at work with me - you know, get to know the trade and whatnot for when he takes over when he's older - but he turned me down. I let it slide, because he's working for you, of course, but I can't help but feel-"

"Stoick, think 'bout what ye sayin'," Gobber interrupts him. "It's rather obvious\_ why\_ the boy does what he does."

I don't hear anything, so I assume my dad's giving his friend a questioning look. Of course he doesn't know why I love working on and riding bikes. He never even bothers to ask about it - or about really \_anything\_ that's going on in my life, for that matter. Hell, for all he knows, I'm still in the robotics club at school and building model airplanes up in my room; in other words, I'm probably still eleven in his mind.

"How old was Hiccop when he started getting into bikes, eigh?" Gobber goes on.

"Dunno. Maybe aroundâ€¦ middle school age?" I hear my dad answer.

"Gob, you know I don't keep track of those kinds of things."

"Well, maybe ye should!"

"What in Odin's name are you getting at?"

Gobber sighs, letting a brief pause appear in the conversation. I want to stop listening, to pop out from behind the wall and announce myself, just to make them stop talking about me behind my back, like I know they often do. Even though this urge is inside of me, I don't. I can't. This is the only way I can find out what my dad thinks of me, as sad as that sounds, and I don't want to ruin it.

"He's hurtin', Stoick," Gobber finally speaks up. "He's usin' all this bike nonsense to forget 'n' ease his mind ofâ€¦ well, of troubling matters."

"What are you talking about?" my dad asks, but I know he already knows exactly what Gobber's referring to. It's the only thing he could be referring to.

Gobber says it right as I think it.

"His mother."

There's a moment of silence as my dad, and even me, let's Gobber's words sink in. I wish I could see their faces, see what my dad must be feeling right now, but I don't want to risk being caught eavesdropping.

"Val died seven years ago," my dad reminds him quietly. "He can't-"

"But he is," Gobber says. "Do ye think he could really get over something like that so quickly? I mean, she was his mother."

"And she was my wife."

"Yeh, but ye also know what he thinks 'bout it all. How he feels... ye know... like he's somewhat responsible for what happened."

My dad doesn't say anything after that, and that's when I can't take it anymore. As much as I want to hear what my dad has to say to that, I don't think I can stand another second of just standing here, listening to this. Without a second thought, I open the door leading to the garage quietly, and then shut it rather hard, so I know the two men in the living room will hear it. As I walk into the kitchen, the silence from the living room is even quieter than it was before I walked in, if that's even possible.

Turning into the living room, I shoot a smile their ways. "Hey, Dad. Gob."

My dad looks nervous as Gobber gives me a nod, but he still manages to respond without looking too suspicious. "Ah, Hiccup! I was wondering where you had gone off to. I tried checking up on you a few minutes ago, before Gobber got here, and you were gone."

"Oh, sorry," I go, trying to play it cool for him; the last thing I want is to suddenly snap in front of him, especially with Gobber

here. "I was getting a little stressed out, so I went for a ride."

"Ah. Well. Tell me next time, alright, son?"

"Gotcha. Hey, uh... I'm gonna head upstairs, maybe settle in early tonight. Wanna wake up earlier to, uhâ€¦ stuffâ€¦"

My dad nods at me as I walk towards the stairs on the other side of the room. "Oh. Alright. Goodnight then."

"Yeah, 'night, Dad. Gobber."

"Sleep tight, Hiccop!" Gobber smiles at me, waving.

I go up the stairs by two as the two men sit in silence behind me, probably waiting for me to close my bedroom door so they can continue talking without me hearing. I have to fight the urge to slam said door behind me as I enter my room, anger suddenly overwhelming me.

He bikes because it gets his mind off of his mother,  
\_blah.\_

\_Whatever.\_

Gobber may think that's the reason, but that isn't the truth, I know it. I bike because I love it, that's why. I love the rush I get as I pass thirty miles per hour, wind flowing all around me as I pedal my feet like my life depends on it. It has \_nothing\_ to do with my mom, absolutely nothing. It was just a coincidence that I started taking riding more seriously after she died, that's all. They have\_ nothing\_ in common.

"They act like they know me," I say to Toothless, whom is already lying comfortably on my pillow. "But they don't know \_anything.\_ Notice how they didn't even bother to ask me how my day was. Gah, they don't even care!" I belly flop on to my bed, making Toothless jump up from his place and scurry off the bed. Telling him sorry is on the tip of my tongue, but he's already bolted into my bathroom before I can.

Fine. Useless felineâ€¦

I turn on to my back and stare up at my popcorn ceiling. I had felt tired while putting my bike away, but now. Now I'm just pissed off. I mean, I had been upset already about not being able to race this weekend, and not to mention being reminded for the \_hundredth time\_ how I'll never stand a chance with Astrid, but \_this?\_ Having to hear my dad not only talking about how utterly confusing I am to him as a person, but also talking about my mom and how she incorporates into this mess and how I feel about her death. Now \_that's\_ just pushing it.

The thought of my mom makes the anger I'm feeling disappear, but only by a bit. The anger left inside of me however isn't towards my dad for becoming so distant and secretive around me ever since mom died, but rather at myself. I remember what I did that day when I was eight, and I'll never forget it.

I feel the corner of my eyes begin to grow watery, so I quickly whip them with my hand. No. No crying. You can't cry, you wimp. I'm not going to let you think about stuff like that, not right now. Today's already been pretty crappy. Thinking about what happened seven years ago is just going to make it even worse. Just don't think about it...

Something soft rubs up against my leg as I hear a low purring sound. Sitting up, whipping my eyes one last time, I look down at my feet to see Toothless, nuzzling up against me in an attempt to give me some comfort. I guess he forgives me for scaring him earlier.

"Thanks, bud," I go with a soft sniff, stroking his back, which arches with pleasure. "Let's get to bed, alright? I've had about enough of today."

#### 4. That Didn't Go Too Badly

**\*\*Gah, one day late for the update. Damn...\*\***

Not much to really say about this chapter, so I guess I'll skip my typical monologue up here and let you guys get straight to the reading.

Thanks for the reviews and favs and whathaveyou! They're always super, duper appreciated!

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I'm stationed in an arm chair similar to the one my father carried into our new house's living room only about a week ago; only this chair's fabric doesn't feel as comfortable as the one back home, but I'm not going to complain. By the way my mother is sitting stiffly next to me, flipping through a magazine with some woman I've never seen before on the cover, I can tell she probably doesn't want to have to listen to me complain right now.

On the short drive to this place she referred to as "the dentist office", I had been asking questions a mile per minute. I discovered this wasn't the best idea however because, one, my mother is definitely not a morning person and it had been around eight in the morning when she ushered me into the family car; and two, she still has yet to lock eyes with me for more than five seconds. So, as we approached a stop light in town and I asked her what all the names for all the different types of teeth are, she kind ofâ€¦ well, I think I struck a nerve, because she made me promise not to say another word, unless asked, for the rest of our outing. In the end, this is a miracle, because, if I were to have continued to talk, I may have let last Thursday's incident spill.

Emma had been persistent on telling our parents about my "little episode", as we like to call it now, but I fought against this. Yes, I may have blacked out. Yes, I may have seen things I don't understand. And yes, I may have been in excruciating pain. After applying the ice pack and taking a short nap though, I can say I felt

completely better, as if it had never even happened. It's not like it's happened again or anything either, so I honestly just didn't see the point in worrying them.

In the end, we agreed that, if something like that were to happen again, we would tell. Until then, they don't need to know.

At exactly eight thirty, a young woman with lots of blonde hair pulled into a bun on top of her head pushes through a door on the other side of the room and says, "Overland?" I assume this is me by the way my mother places the magazine she had been reading down on the table next to her and gets up. I trail after her like a duckling through the "waiting room" - or something like that; I can't quite remember what my mother called it when I asked - and into a long, narrow hallway.

The young woman - her name tag reads Cindy, so I assume this is her name - leads us into the third doorway on the right, looking directly at me as she asks me to take a seat in the chair. This said chair, I'm not going to lie, is rather intimidating: there are white pipe structures perturbing off of it, a small tray filled with instruments that remind me too much of my stay in the hospital. There's even a sink attached to it, and that's just baffling, because why would\_ that \_need to be there?

"Come on then," I hear my mother say, beckoning me towards the chair, sounding somewhat impatient. "I still need to drop you off at home before getting to work. We need to go." She takes her own seat in a chair similar to the ones out in the waiting room, positioned in the corner of the room.

I look at Cindy, and she returns my look with a smile. I decide to trust her. Besides. I don't think I really have a choice.

After taking a seat in the odd chair, Cindy presses a button on the armrest and the whole structure begins to recline. I must have looked rather alarmed by this, because my mother shoots me a look that has "act normal!" written all over it, so I obey by pretending I'm yawning.

For the next couple of minutes, Cindy does some poking around in my mouth with some of her tools. There is some momentary pain as the sharp end of one of the instruments scraps what I think is called my "gums", but I suck it up. My mother had told me that whatever they may do to me here may hurt a bit, so it's not like I wasn't warned.

Cindy, now done with poking around in my mouth, tells my mother what I guess is information about my teeth, but I'm too busy studying the tooth diagram on the wall next to me to hear any of it. Apparently the very center of the tooth is referred to as the "pulp", which I also have heard is the name for the center of an egg. I wonder if the two have anything in common, though I seriously doubt it, seeing as there doesn't seem to be any other similarities between a tooth and an egg. I try to remind myself to ask Emma about it when I get home.

As I continue to observe the poster, Cindy gets up, removing the plastic gloves from her hands, and leaves the room. I look over at my mother.

"Where is she going?" I ask.

My mother shoots me a look, like she's reminding me that I promised I wouldn't say anything. To my surprise though, she answers. "That was just the nurse. The real dentist is coming in shortly to give you an x-ray and clean your teeth."

I nod my head, confirming I understand. On the inside though, I'm jumping around in my seat. An x-ray! I get to have an x-ray taken! And of my mouth! Emma had told me about these things when we were playing Scrabble I think, and I've been curious to what it must be like to get one.

After a couple more minutes of silence, a man whose hair is the color of ash and skin is an exotic light brown steps through the threshold, snapping on some plastic gloves a lot like Cindy's. He sports a white coat, the top button left undone, a pair of thin-framed glasses, and a small name tag with the name Dr. Farry printed neatly on its sleek surface.

"Hello, Jack," he greets with a smile. His teeth probably have to be the whitest and straightest set of teeth I've ever set eyes on, but I suppose that is a given, considering his is a dentist. "My nurse tells me that you have absolutely stunning teeth. Mind if I take a look for myself?"

"Will I be getting an x-ray?" I ask before thinking.

I can see my mother about to speak up, likely to tell the dentist she's "sorry for my behavior", but Dr. Farry beats her by saying, "Of course! Right after I take a quick look, okay?" He shoots me a warm smile, and I have a hard time not returning it before opening my mouth for him.

Dr. Farry ohh's and ahh's over my teeth for a good minute, going on about how I must brush and floss at least three times a day to be able to obtain such pearly whites - which is true, I do, once after every meal. His odd vocabulary and interest in my teeth makes it impeccably hard for me to not burst out laughing, but I fight it.

Getting the x-ray comes and goes a lot faster than I had been expecting it to happen, and this leaves me feeling a tad disappointed, but not enough to ruin the rest of my appointment with Dr. Farry, who turns out to be a rather interesting guy. Despite my mother's earlier wishes, I strike up a conversation with the dentist rather quickly, which is proven an easy task since he appears to already have a natural ability to make small talk. I ignore my mother's narrowed eyes as I tell Dr. Farry about little snippets from my everyday life that he, for whatever reason, finds amusing. I do, however, stay away from topics concerning my memory loss and such related subjects, since I've learned to believe that those aren't the kinds of things you talk to with total strangers.

All the conversation makes the appointment go quickly, and it seems like only a couple minutes has passed since we started as Dr. Farry snaps off his gloves and mask and tells me, "Well, you're all good to go, Jack. It was nice meeting you. As of you, Mrs Overland." My mother gives him a strained smile as I say it was nice meeting him as

well, but he doesn't seem to notice it. "Paula should be up front at the check-out table. She'll deal with your payment."

My mother and I get up from our chairs, my mother saying, "Alright. Thank you, Dr. Farry, for your time." She then turns to face me and mouths out words I am barely able to catch.

I turn towards Dr. Farry after a beat. "Yes! Thank you." I glimpse over towards my mother, maybe hoping for a satisfied nod or anything showing her approval for following her directions, but she's already heading out the doorway behind Dr. Farry. I fight to let out a sigh as I follow them.

As my mother converses with this young black-haired woman named Paula about our payment for the visit, I stand a decent distance away from them, near where two small water fountains are planted on the wall. Money and business talk, I've discovered, isn't very appealing to me. I'm about to take a drink from the fountains though when I notice out of the corner of my eyes, a pair of small eyes staring at me from around the corner. As my eyes met with them and I shoot them a smile, the head they belong to darts out of view behind the wall.

"Hello," I say softly, so my mother doesn't hear. "You don't have to be scared. I'm a friend."

The eyes pop back into view, only this time I can also see a button nose and a pair of lips. "You're not my friend," they tell me before disappearing around the corner again.

I'm a little taken aback by this comment as I bend down on to my knees. "Why am I not your friend?"

The head doesn't come into view this time as I hear, "Because I don't even know you!"

"Wellâ€¦ do you \_want \_to know me?"

All I can hear for a moment are the noises coming from the tools being used by the other dentists in the rooms down the hallway, footsteps and chatter accompany it. I'm about to get back up and wander over towards my mother again when I see a small girl wearing a magenta colored dress and a large green flower in her wavy, ash brown hair, appear from around the corner. She's carrying a stuffed, blue rabbit in her arms as she approaches me, still crouched down on the floor.

Once she's standing in front of me, I say, with a smile, "I'm Jack." It's then that I notice that one of her eyes is a vivid light blue and the other is a surprisingly light pink. I wasn't even aware pink \_could\_ be someone's eye color.

"I'm Aly," she tells me. "And this is Bunnymund." She lifts her stuffed rabbit for me to see.

"He's cute," I say with a smirk. "Where'd you get him?"

"My sissy's friend gave 'im to me for myâ€¦" She stops and pulls up her small hand, counting her fingers slowly, as not to mess up. "My fifth birthday, I think."



"That was sweet of them," I say. "How old are you?"

"Eight."

"My little sister's nine."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Maybe you can come over and play with her someday."

She nods her head, a small grin her face. "Does \_she\_ have a stuffed bunny toy too?"

I think for a moment, trying to recall all the stuffed animals littering Emma's bedroom floor. I want to tell the little girl that I recall seeing one, but I can't be sure.

"I don't know," I tell her honestly. "But she has \_a lot\_ of other toys too. And she knows magic tricks."

Aly smiles at this, her eyes seeming to glow at the mention of the word magic. "Do\_ you\_ know magic tricks?"

"Yeah, I do," I tell her, sneakily sticking my hand into my front pocket. To my pleasure, she doesn't seem to notice me doing this. "Emma taught me one just the other day."

"Who's Emma?"

"My sister."

"Oh. Wellâ€¦ can I see it?"

"Sure Justâ€¦ w-wait a second." I move a little closer to her, squinting my eyes, as if searching for something. "Is thatâ€¦ I think there's something in your ear, Aly?"

Her hands both dart up to her ears, Bunnymund being lifted lazily up in front of me. There's a slight panicked expression crossing her face as I tell her it's okay.

"Don't worry, don't worry," I assure her. "I'll got it." I reach out, gently move her hand away from her ear, and cup my hand around it instead. Once I pull away, I open my hand to reveal a small dime sitting in my palm, glistening under the florescent lights above us.

"How did you\_ do\_ that?"

I look up and Aly is wearing the biggest grin, showing off two missing side teeth on either side of her mouth. Her heterochromatic eyes are glowing again as she continues to stare at me for an answer. Grabbing her small hand, I drop the dime into her possession.

"A magician never reveals his secrets."

As the little girl drops the coin into her dress's pocket, still smiling at me, I hear someone from down an adjacent hallway call out her name. She hears it too by the way she looks over her shoulder, the smile whipped clean off her face. That's when I realize that I

don't even know \_where\_ this little girl came from. All the children that are patients here were outside in the waiting room, yet Aly was already back here, not accompanied by an adult of any kind. I wonder why that is.

"Someone's looking for you?" I ask her.

"Yeeeeeah," she goes with a sigh. "My big sissy. I was \_supposed\_ to stay with her, but she got boring."

I smile at this. "Well, you better go back to her. Don't want her to-"

I'm not able to finish my sentence when I see a girl, maybe around my age, appear in the doorway behind Aly. At seeing her bright pink eyes and the similar hair color to the little girl standing in front of me, I'm instantly able to connect the dots that this must be the "big sissy" Aly was telling me about.

"Aly!" the girl says, letting the name out along with a sigh of relief. "I told you to not wander off like that! Dad doesn't want you getting lost."

"But I'm not \_lost\_!" Aly protests, tightening her grasp around Bunnymund. "I'm with Jack!"

The girl makes eye contact with me as I straighten up, now able to see all the different shade of pink in her mesmerizing eyes. In that moment, I realize that \_this\_ girl, with her wavy, ash colored hair pulled back into a stubby ponytail and light chocolate colored skin, is the first girl my age that I've ever seen.

"Who are you?" is all she asks me.

"He's Jack!" Aly speaks up before I can. "He's my friend! He showed me magic. See?" Aly pulls out the dime I had given to her earlier and presents it to her sister with pride. "He pulled it outta my ear!"

To my surprise, the tense, older girl lets out a laugh, allowing her shoulders to relax. "Oh, \_did\_ he now?" she asks, giving me this look that I wasn't particularly ready for. "Are you some sort of magician then, \_Jack\_?" she asks me, and all I can do is shrug in response; I get the feeling that the mediocre amount of words that I do know would fail me at this point.

Aly is telling her sister about what I did and how\_ amazing\_ it was when I see it. Sitting on the collarbone of the older girl, held up by a single thread of string, sits a tooth, about the size of a pinky nail. It's stunningly white against her dark skin, and oddly clean, since I've heard that, after pulling out a tooth, they're usually covered in blood and gum. As I stare at the little pendant, a memory registers in my mind; no, not one from before the accident that whipped my memories clean, but from one of my earlier memories with Emma in the hospital.

"Are you the tooth fairy?" I ask.

The older girl's pink eyes land on me again, her smile fading.

"E-excuse me?" she asks.

I point at her necklace charm. "You have a tooth on your necklace," I tell her. "I just thoughtâ€¦ Iâ€¦ uhâ€¦" Suddenly, I'm at a loss for words. Ugh, why did I even say anything? I \_know\_ I'm not good with words, so why did I even bother to speak up? I should've just said bye to Aly and wandered back over to my mother. Now this girl probably thinks I'm weird for, one, staring at her necklace, and two, asking her if she's the tooth fairy.

"No, she's not the tooth fairy!" Aly finally says, breaking the silence. "That'd be cool though. Then I could have all the money I want when I lose my teeth!"

The girl looks down at her little sister, obviously still trying to compute what I had said to her. "Yeah. No. I, uhâ€¦ I'm not the, uhâ€¦ the tooth fairy."

"Oh," is all I'm able to say. "I, umâ€¦ yeah. Iâ€¦ hi. I'm Jack."

Wow. Justâ€¦ wow.

The girl smiles though, which eases the inner pain I'm conflicted on myself. "Hi, Jack," she says back. "Thanks for, uh, giving my sis a dime. She loves money. And magic."

"Same here," I say. "I mean, the magic part. Not as much of fan for the, uhâ€¦ for the moneyâ€¦ part..."

I'm about to ask her what her name is, since it seems like the kind of question one would ask at about this point in a conversation - if that's even what we're having, which I can't really tell - but I'm not able to when I hear someone calling my name behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I see my mother, giving me this look that shows that she's upset; her arms are crossed as her purse hangs lazily from over her shoulder. She cocks her head towards the door, signaling that we need to leave.

I look back at the girls. "I got to go. It was, uhâ€¦ it was nice meeting you two."

"Bye, Jack!" Aly waves to me as I back towards the exit of the office. "Thanks for the dime!"

As I wave to her, the older girl looks awkwardly down at the ground. I don't even bother to say goodbye to her; she probably thinks I'm some kind of weirdo.

"Have fun?" my mother asks me with an edgy tone as we leave the office, clearly not happy with how I spent my last couple of minutes. She had strictly told me not to talk to anyone during this outing - had even made me promise - and I had broken it.

Hey though. I got a new friend - yeah, so what if she's only eight, it still counts - and I believe that's worth risking everything for.

I smile brightly at her. "Yes. Yes, I did."

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I hadn't thought I was going to take a bike ride today; I usually don't after having to mow lawns for four hours, but I'm just so filled up with anger right now that I needed to get out of the house.

Today revealed to be sort of a crappy day, not going to lie. Fish was late picking me up due to getting held up at home by his parents, who nagged at him for forgetting to let Meatlug, their pet bulldog, out the night before, resulting in her pooping all over their living room's new carpet. Because of our lateness, Gobber wasn't all too happy to have a ten minute late start, along with all the other guys, who continually shoot us glares while we were being dropped off at our house. While at our first house, I discovered that Lout is one of our clients the hard way: as he was leaving to go out, he threw what appeared to be a baseball under my lawn mower, therefore absolutely ruining it beyond repair. So not only did I have to borrow Mister Jorgenson's personal lawn mower, which was super embarrassing in itself, but I also owe Gobber a good two hundred bucks for something I didn't even break. Then, while at The Ring for lunch with Fish afterwards, I accidentally bumped straight into Astrid after leaving the restroom, causing the huge grease monster she was carrying on her tray to splat on to her uniform's front. She was so pissed off afterwards, she won't even make eye contact with me when I ordered my lunch.

And now I have to deal with this. Right when I thought that being under the roof of my very own house meant that the cruel tricks of the world couldn't reach me, my dad had to walk in and make everything worse by bringing up my future and what I plan on doing with my life.

"You spend all your free time working on and riding that bike," he had told me. "Don't you want to do something moreâ€¦ productive with your time, son?"

We have had this conversation a million times before, but today's argument wasn't like the rest, not really. Normally I'm able to just throw my arms into the air once I've at enough and storm off to lock myself in the room for the rest of the evening, but not this time. This time, my dad actually followed me upstairs and into my room, still going on and on about how I'm "the future for the company" and how I need to "get my head screwed on straight if I want to be successful with taking his place one day", which caused Toothless, the poor guy, to scamper into my bathroom out of fear.

"But what if I don't want to take your place in the company?" I threw at him. "Have you ever once stopped and thought about what I want to do with my life, not what you want me to do?"

I got him with that. I guess he hadn't really thought of what I want to do, which, to me, was just the most upsetting thing to find out.

Not once in my entire life have I ever shown any interest in the family business, not once. While growing up, all I ever did with my time was draw and write stories and play with my limited number of friends outside, usually playing pretend games. Now, as a teenager, I'm still not showing any interest in what he wants me to do, so why can't the guy just take a hint?

I notice I've picked up speed as I reach the rural portion of town, the nicely paved roads bleeding into rough and rocky dirt ones. I pull on my brakes a little to slow down. Don't want to take another spill on this road, like this one time in seventh grade. The gashes caused by little rocks piercing into my skin and the later scars are definitely not worth it.

Why can't my dad just be okay with what I want to do? Why can't he just accept that fact that I don't want to be heir to his company? I mean, yeah, I know I'm kind of expected to take over once he leaves, considering I am his only son, but that's not my fault; I didn't ask to be an only child, now did I?

I lean forward the rest my head on my bike's handlebars. The road ahead goes on straight for some time, so no need to worry about unexpected turns.

And then my dad mentioned something about someone coming over for dinner sometime this week? Yeah, that was weird. We never have anyone over, and if we do, it's Gobber, and even then, my dad doesn't tell me about it. When Gobber shows up at our place, it's understood that, well, he's there. No big deal; he's like an extended part of the family, really.

Who in the world though could be coming over for dinner with us? My dad doesn't really have any friends, besides Gobber, of course. And even if he did, he wouldn't go out of his way to warn me about it.

Ugh, this is all too frustrating. Everything about this day just sucks really, really bad.

I decide to pull over, realizing that I was drifting off the road before roughly pulling myself back on course. Getting off my bike, I look around for a place to just rest for a while before having to get headed back home for what I expect to be a very uncomfortable dinner. I notice an old pine tree a couple of yards away off the side of the road, it's branches starting a good ten feet above the ground and sprawling out in all directions. There's not a single soul in sight, so I start heading towards it.

After placing my bike gently against the trunk of the pine and collapsing alongside it, I allow myself to close my eyes and just listening to my breathing. The sun is on the opposite side of the sky, so no need to worry about squinting or sweating up a puddle, and the slight breeze moving around me feels nice and relaxing - just what I needed. I lean my head back further, my eyes still closed as my body moves down the trunk into a somewhat reclined position. Now that I think about it, I should just stay here. Yeah, my dad'll be pissed as all hell, but this is just so nice, sitting under this tree by myself, away from all my worries and-

I hear a rustle in the leaves overhead, and my eyes snap open to come face to face with a thin, white haired boy sitting in the branches above me.

He raises his hand from his side. "Hi."

"Uhâ€¦ hey?" I say back slowly. "Whatcha, uhâ€¦ doin' up there?"

"Hiding from my mom," the boy tells me, his eyes, which I notice are a piercing blue, still looking down at me.

"O-oh?"

"Well, I'm not really \_hiding,"\_ he goes on, correcting himself. "She doesn't know I'm gone, which means she can't really be looking for me, so I don't think that would really mean I'm hiding. Or at least I don't think soâ€¦" He stops and seems to really be thinking this over as I stand back up in order to see him better.

"Why are you hiding from her exactly?" I decide to ask.

"She's upset with me."

"For doing what?"

"Honestlyâ€¦ I don't really know. I think I broke some of her rules. I don't know. She can be really strict."

"Sounds like it."

"What about you?" he asks me, this little grin appearing on his face, showing me a set of teeth almost as white as his hair. "What are\_ you\_ doing way out here by yourself?"

I don't answer him right away, because why would I? Hell, I don't even \_know\_ who this kid is. Why would I tell him my business of being here? Then againâ€¦ talking with someone that doesn't know my situation may be beneficial; I may be able to get \_a lot\_ off my chest this way; and by looking at his face, which is just giving off the vibe of genuinely wanting to know why I'm here, I feel the urge to actually explain myself.

"I guess I'm kind of hiding from my dad," I tell him. "Except, like you, I'm not really \_hiding."\_"

"Ahhh," the boy goes, nodding his head. "Did you break some of his rules too?"

"Iâ€¦ guess?"

"What did you do?"

I don't know what it is, but after hearing him ask me this, I suddenly start to regret striking up a conversation with this weird, white haired stranger - who's sitting in a\_ tree\_, let me point out. Despite how I felt the urge to talk to him only seconds ago, I don't feel much like explaining my entire situation to him anymore, because who would want to sit through something like that anyways? Pfft, I most definitely wouldn't, that's for sure.

"I, uhâ€¦. whoâ€¦ who are youâ€¦ exactly?"

The boy doesn't seem to notice the sudden change of topic, much to my relief. "Oh!" he goes in response instead, an even larger grin than before making its way into his pale face. "I'm Jack!"

"Uhâ€¦ okay. Hi, Jack."

"Hi!"

We continue to look at each other, Jack's blue eyes staring into mine, and I begin to feel quite uncomfortable, to say the least. What \_is\_ it with this kid? You don't just stare at people like that. Then again, I\_ am\_ kind of staring at him too, soooâ€¦

"Listen, uhâ€¦ I should probably get going," I tell him, breaking the awkward - at least from my side - eye contact and reaching for my bike lying on the tree beside me. "My dad's probably expecting me home soon for dinner and I don't want to-"

"Actually!" Jack interrupts, cutting me off mid-sentence. I look up, and instead of wearing that grin from before, he's features appear to give off more of a nervous expression. "I was wondering if you could help me downâ€¦"

I stop reaching for my bike and look back up at him, a look of disbelief on my face, no doubt. "You want me to \_help you down?\_ From this \_tree?\_"

He nods.

"Don't youâ€¦ you don't know how to get down?"

Now looking a little embarrassed, he shakes his head.

"How did you even get up there to begin with then, man?"

He just shrugs down at me. "I don't know. I just climbed, I guess."

"You \_guess?\_"

"Yeah. I guess."

"And you didn't once stop to think about how you'd be getting down from there?"

He opens his mouth, but stops before the words come out, appearing to be rethinking his answer. "Nnnnnnnnnno," he finally says, slowly. "I didn't."

I can't help but let out a dry chuckle. "Well, you've really got yourself into quite a predicament here, now haven't you?\_"

"A what?"

"Huh?"

"What is that?"

"What is what?"

"Aâ€¦ whatever you said. A predica-whata-what."

"A \_predicament?\_"

"Yeah."

At this point, I really can't help but stare up at him. Does he seriously not know what a predicament is? I mean, I can get some people having never heard of the word before, but those people probably consist of little kids and people just learning English with small vocabularies. This Jack guy here appears to be older than me, so I wonder what his excuse is.

"It's, likeâ€¦ a problem. You've got yourself into some real trouble here, y'know?" I explain. By his expression and his "oooooooooh!", I'm able to assume he gets what I've told him.

"But can you help me?" he asks, and by the tone in his voice, I can tell he really means it; this kid seriously doesn't know how to get down from this tree.

I shrug. "I guess you can just jump or something."

"Y-you think?" He sounds uneasy by this plan of action.

I put my hands up. "I don't know what else to tell ya, man. I'd jump if I were you though. It really isn't that far of a drop."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Go for it, I say."

"O-okay." He scoots a little off the edge of the thick branch he's perched on and looks down at the ground, where I'm standing. By the way his eyes grow wide, I can tell he's not really feeling my plan.

"Don't look down," I say up to him. "It'll make it less scary."

Jack nods and looks away from the ground, closing his eyes shortly afterwards. Before I can ask him if he's going to do it or not, since he's just kind of sitting there with his eyes closed, he's falling, and the next thing I know, he's on the ground, knees and hands pressed up against the grass.

"Oh gods! Are you okay?" I ask hurriedly, running up to his side as he removes his hands from the ground, resting on his knees. The little strands of green stand out astonishingly well against his white pigment; I have to fight the urge to let out a snicker, which makes me feel slightly bad.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he assures me with a smile, rubbing some of the grass embedded on his hands off and back on to the ground. I help him up, finding out that he stands a good head taller than me.

"You sure?" I pester onward, noticing the small cuts on his knees.



"Looks like you got some-"

"Woooooah! Is that \_yours?"\_ he asks me, ripping his arm from my grasp and approaching the bike.

"Uhâ€¦ yeah."

"This is so \_cool\_! Where'd you get it?"

"Aâ€¦ bikeâ€¦ storeâ€¦?"

"Oh." He crouches down in front of the bike and begins to inspect it, poking the tire and many spokes gingerly with his white finger. I can't help but think that maybe this is the first time this kid's ever really seen a bike, which I know sounds absolutely ridiculous, but man, he didn't know what a \_predicament \_was.

His white hair whips around so that he's facing me again. "I think I have one of these things too," he tells me, a large smile on his face. It's then that I notice that, dang, this kid's got some really blue eyes. Like, I thought they were blue before when he was up in that tree, but \_now.\_

"Oh yeah?" I go, ripping my gaze from his eyes.

"Yeah." He jumps up, making me move back some. This kid's so bouncing and fast; I feel like he's going to fall over and on top of me or something if he makes one misstep. "Want to go see it? My house is just down there. It's not really that far away. We can walk together!"

His question catches me completely off guard. Is heâ€¦ he's really asking me, a completely and utter \_stranger\_, to come to his house so he can show me his bike? Is that kid for \_real?\_

I guess he notices the discomfort on my face, because he licks his lips and says, "It really isn't that far. And, wellâ€¦ I don't know much about bikes. And you seem to, so..."

I don't know \_what \_it is, but the good person inside of me sees pass the whole him being a stranger that has white hair, impossibly blue eyes, and skin the color of snow. I mean, yeah, the kid's a little weird with his extreme enthusiasm leaking from his smile and his social awkwardness, but he is pretty much begging me - in a very subtle way - to join him at his house to check out his bike, and why should I complain or say no to that? He wants to talk \_bikes,\_ which, last time I checked, is my second \_language\_. If anything, I should be thrilled to have someone that wants to get my opinion on something like this.

I grab my bike's handlebars and shoot him a smile. "Lead the way."

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This tiny, green eyed boy with more freckles on his face than I can

count tells me his name is Hiccup, and I almost completely lose it. Emma's told me that there are some people out there with very odd names, some even unpronounceable, but Hiccup? \_Hiccup?\_ I have to cover my mouth with my hand after he tells me this bit of information, fearing that he'd hear my laugh.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh if you must," I hear him tell me with a smirk on his face, his bike by his side as we make our way down the dirt road towards my house. "Don't worry about it. I'm used to it."

"That isn't your\_ real\_ name, is it?" I ask, removing my hand from my mouth.

"Nah," he says. "You think my parents would actually\_ name\_ me that?"

"I don't know. They could, if they wanted to."

"Well, they didn't, thank the gods."

I laugh as I see the house coming into view. "What \_did\_ they name you?"

"Hey, isn't that your place?" he asks, changing the subject rather abruptly. I don't point it out though, because if he doesn't want to talk about his name - like he didn't want to talk about why he was way out here in the middle of nowhere earlier when I asked - then that's fine by me. Everyone's entitled to their own business, right?

"Yep, that's the place!" I tell him, throwing my arms up. "We moved in just a couple of weeks ago."

"Yeah, I know."

"You know?"

"I mowed your lawn the day you guys moved in," he explains to me. "My friend thought you having white hair was the weirdest thing. Why\_ is\_ it white anyways? Do you dye it?"

I shrug, ignoring the word "dye", which I don't know the meaning of. "I came with it."

"Sooooo, what? Are you, like, albino or something?"

"Al-what?"

"It'sâ€¦| nevermind."

We continue up the rugged driveway, his bike bouncing slightly in his hands as we go. I feel the compelling urge to be asking him something, carrying our conversation forward, but nothing seems to come to mind. I decide to stay quiet, since I've noticed that when the words don't naturally come to me, I usually end up saying something wrong.

As we approach the garage door, I tell him we're going to have to lift it, since my father has yet to install the "remote control" or

something that makes it open up with a click of a button. Hiccup grabs the left side, almost losing his grip the first time around, as I grab the right. On the count of three, we both heave the door open, causing it to slide on to the ceiling of the garage.

"Alright," I hear him go, dusting off his hands on his shirt and looking at the watch on his wrist. "Let's see this bike of yours. I need to be heading home soon anyways, soâ€¦"

Giving him a quick nod, I make my way over towards the bike rack in the corner of the garage, my eyes landing and locked on a white and blue one that caught my attention when my father was carrying it in a couple of weeks ago. I hear Hiccup approach me from behind as I lift it from its supports and lower it to the concrete floor. I'm about to tell him that, yep, this is it, but I'm cut off by him letting out a sharp gasp.

"Is that\_â€¦ no,"\_ he says under his breath, his eyes large and round like the snow globe in my room as his hand shoots up to cover his mouth. "That\_ can't\_ be..." I give him a confused look, and he his eyes grow even wider at this. "Are youâ€¦ are you telling me you're\_ not\_ aware of the kind of bike you're holding on to right now?"

I look down at the bike; it's a basic paper white with electric blue outlining its limbs, a black TREK written down the middle bar. I want to say I see something special about it, considering Hiccup here definitely does, but I'd be lying if I did. To me, it just looks like any other bike.

"That," Hiccup goes, walking up to me on the other side of the bike and touching the handlebar, "is a Trek Madone 7.7." Crouching down, he seems to be inspecting the bike further, his eyes gawking at everything between the cushioned seat to the sturdy handlebars, running his fingers down the spokes and on to the tires. "Wow. What a beauty."

"Soâ€¦ this is a special bike?" I ask, crouching down beside him, seeing him through the spokes in the tire.

He shoots me another shocked look, like he honestly cannot believe I don't know the worth of this bike. "Is thisâ€¦ you're \_kidding\_ me. Do you even\_ know \_much a bike like this \_costs?"\_

I shake my head.

"Likeâ€¦ \_eight thousand dollars, \_man."

"Is that a lot?"

As he gives me that shocked look again, I can't help but try to hide a smile. I figured this guy liked bikes, but I wasn't aware he likes them\_ this\_ much.

"Let me put this into perspective for you," he says, getting up and walking over towards his bike leaning against the wall. "My bike here costs me a good, ehâ€¦ four fifty? Somewhere around there. That bike \_you're\_ holding is worth, likeâ€¦ something likeâ€¦ eighteen, nineteen times \_more\_ than what I paid for mine."

I stare blankly at him, not fully understanding what all these

confusing numbers really have to do with his and my bike.

"Your bike's cost is the equivalent to, likeâ€¦ a nice, small, new car!"

"Oh! Oh, wow."

"Exactly! Gods, your parents must be loaded or something."

"I don't know. We have nice stuff, but I don't think we're, likeâ€¦ rich or anything."

"Well, whatever you guys are, this is a nice bike."

As I get back up from crouching and look down at the bike, I can't help but wonder: why? This bike looks almost the same as his; his is just somewhat smaller, and the handlebars and seat are both shaped differently, and the colors are both polar opposites, mine white, his black. Other than those few details though, I don't see much of a difference.

"Where in the world did you even get something like that, man?"

"It's my father's," I tell him. "But he said I can have it now. I think he used to race it."

"No shit," Hiccup walks back up the bike and touches the handlebars again, still seeming to be taking it all in. "I hope he was some sort of professional biker or something, because this is definitely a professional's bike. Would've been a total waste of money if he didn't race it, y'know."

I respond with a shrug, since I honestly don't know. I've never bothered to ask my father why we have a decent handful of nice bikes locked up in the garage.

Hiccup looks down at his watch then and grimaces. "I should probably head back home," he tells me, patting my bike's handlebar's one last time before going back over to his bike. "Gettin' kinda late, and I need to be home before it gets dark."

"Oh. O-okay, yeah," I go, leaning my bike against the wall. "If you ever want to, you knowâ€¦ come back over, feel free to! You could tell me some more about my 'incredible bike' or whatever."

I don't know why, but he gives me this uneasy look as he attempts to return my smile. "Yeahâ€¦ I'll, uhâ€¦ I'll keep that mind. Thanksâ€¦"

"Okay. I'll see you around then!"

He returns my farewell with a simple wave as he turns, picks up his bike, and kicks off the ground, rolling down my driveway. As he goes though, I notice something about the boy that I didn't catch before; his left leg, instead of being a tanned peach color and made of flesh, like the rest of him, is made of what appears to be metal. I'm just standing there, staring after him, jaw dropped, trying to figure out how I should feel about this. I've never heard of someone having a metal leg beforeâ€¦ maybe Emma knows a thing or two about

it.

Looking back up, letting the fascination with Hiccup's metal leg, I watch his small silhouette disappear down the street and out of sight.

Well. That didn't go too badly, right?

## 5. I Don't Know How to Ride a Bike

**\*\*It's 11:51 PM where I am right now, so I'm updating on time.  
HA.\*\***

Don't have much to say about this chapter. Um...

Thanks for all the reviews and love and stuff! All your lovely comments are keeping me writing!

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"Hiccup Haddock, you are such a liar."

I let out a heavy sigh, putting down my cheese burger that I haven't even had the pleasure of taking a bite out of yet as I hear the sound of skates roll up behind me. Once I turn around in my seat, Fish across from me looking up momentarily from his meal, I come face to face with a rather displeased looking Astrid, one hand on her hip and the other holding an empty tray.

"May I ask what exactly I'm being accused for?" I say in a sarcastic response, shooting her a smile meant only to piss her off more. And it works; as soon as my good vibes get to her, she narrows her light blue eyes.

"You're being accused for lying, you wimp. You said you'd race against Lout this last Saturday, but when I got there, you weren't there." She flips the tray upright and placing it on our table before taking a seat next to Fish. "Can't say I wasn't surprised to see you decided to not show, but still. Why weren't you there?"

"I thought you said you weren't racing," I remind her. "Something about your precious Deadly Nadder being in the shop getting new wheels, right?"

"I didn't race. I was there to watch you clobber Lout. And don't change the subject."

"I never made any promises," I tell her, putting my hands up as to surrender. The last thing I want to do right now is to have an argument with Astrid over a promise I never even made to begin with. I mean, Fish's and my mowing job today was already pretty brutal in itself: this woman was very persistent about allowing her dog to roam free as I mowed her backyard, only making it a thousand times more difficult to get the job done without seriously mangling the stupid mutt.

"He's right, Astrid," Fish backs me up, bless him. "He said he'd \_try\_ to go, but if he coul-"

Astrid shoots him a hard glare, and he stops talking instantly.

"Hey, that's not fair," I snap at her.

Astrid turns her attention towards me again. "What's not fair?"

"You're using your infamous death glare on my co-worker as he tries to defend me. That's an unfair advantage."

I can tell Astrid's trying to not let a smile cross her face; the corners of her lips are fighting to move upward, I can see them, but her cheeks are pushing against it, determined to keep her scowl stationary. In the end, however, a small smirk makes its way through, signaling that I'm, hopefully, off the hook - at least for a little while. Fish notices her smile too as he lets out a small sigh, a satisfied grin on as he goes back to his burger.

"Yeah, wellâ€¦" Astrid goes on, leaning forward and crossing her arms on the table. "You need to get some new battle maneuvers. You're gettin' rusty, Haddock."

I let out a laugh. "I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

"But in all seriousness - which I \_know\_ is hard for you to be, but please bear with me."

\_"Hey."\_"

She just waves me off, dismissing my disapproval. "Why weren't you there Saturday?"

"My chain broke the day after we talked about it."

"Wow. 'Bout time," I hear Fish cut in through bites.

"Yeah. Surprised it took as long as it did for it finally have enough. It was pushing almost three thousand miles."

"Well, did you get a new one?" Astrid asks, looking briefly over at the ordering station. I notice an older girl - probably college age - behind the counter with a crazy amount of red hair on her head shoot her a weird look, but Astrid chooses to just ignore it.

"Yeah," I tell her. "Took more time than I expected, but I got the stupid thing on."

"And have you tested it out yet?"

"Geez. What's with all these questions?" I tease her, resting my chin in my hand, giving her a playful smirk. "You're beginning to sound like you actually \_want\_ to help me or something."

She returns my remark with an eye roll. "In your dreams. Now, did you test it out?"

"Yeah. I wasâ€¦| able to find a reason to leave the house."

I notice Fish out of the corner of my eye give me this concerned look that makes me look back at Astrid without a second thought. After knowing me since we were both five, he's one of the few people in town that knows that me finding a reason to leave the house means that there was a good reason for me to leave the house in the first place. He doesn't say anything though, most likely not wanting to bring this up with Astrid in our presence, so he just goes back to munching on his burger.

Astrid opens her mouth to reply, but she's abruptly cut off by the girl behind the counter calling out, "Hofferson! We're not payin' ya to talk to our customers! Get back to work!"

"Yeah, yeah!" Astrid shouts back, waving the girl off as she gets up from her seat, snatching up her tray in the process. "I swear, you two are going to get me fired again."

I can tell Fish is about to talk back to this comment - tell her \_she\_ was the one that started a conversation with \_us,\_ not the other way around - but before he can, she's already said "see ya" and is gliding over towards the kitchens, her braid trailing behind her as she goes to get her next meal to deliver.

"She really does love putting the blame on us, doesn't she?" I say with a laugh, watching her go. I look over at Fish for his feedback, but all I get from him is that concerned look from before.

"Hiccup-"

Breaking away from his stare, I pick up a fry and soak it in ketchup. "I don't want to talk about it."

"C'mon. What happened?" Fish goes on anyways, ignoring my plea. "Was it your dad again? What'd he do this time?"

"I said I don't want to \_talk\_ about it, Fish."

"Yeah, wellâ€¦| you \_need\_ to talk about it, okay, Hiccup?" He lets out a sigh as I hear him crumble up his leftover burger wrapper. "And, you knowâ€¦| I'm here if you want to."

I take a bite off the fry and chew it in my mouth slowly, allowing myself to let out a soft, "Thanks," but that's as much as Fish is going to get out of me on this topic. He \_knows\_ I'm not the biggest fan when it comes to talking about my dad and his dream of me taking over the family business. Sure, I'll talk about any other aspect of the old man, since, not going to lie, my dad's a pretty decent guy. He may act reserved and overly serious about everything a large majority of the time, but I've seen the guy lighten up on several occasions; it's actually really easy to make him laugh I've discovered, especially if you've somehow managed to get his mind completely off of work. He's a good man, my dad, and I'll admit that I think he's done a more than decent job at raising me these last couple of years without having my mom around, but sometimesâ€¦| sometimes he's just so narrow-minded and stubborn, especially when he believes he's right about something. And those two traits, when it

comes to getting me to follow in his footsteps, are a huge pain the in ass.

"Let's get out of here," I hear Fish say, interrupting my train of thought. "It's getting kinda hot out. Maybe we can find somewhere cool to hang for the rest of the day?"

"Yeah. Good idea," I say. Crumpling up my burger wrapper, I toss it towards the trash can a couple of feet away. It misses, of course, falling on to the ground right next to the metal container, and Fish lets out a series of snickers as I fetch it.

We walk out of the eating area and into the parking lot, listing places we could go with blessed air conditioning. We've just stepped off the curb of the parking lot when I can't help but notice an oddly familiar looking car rolling in. I feel like I've seen the vehicle somewhere before - and recently too - but I can't seem to put my finger on it. As Fish says something about maybe going and getting our bikes so we can hang out at the indoor skate park around here, I watch as an older looking man with dark sand colored hair steps out of the driver's side, not aware of me observing him. He doesn't look familiar, but then again, if I don't recognize him right away, that can only mean that he must be new to town, which can only mean-

Fish nudges me as he notices the young boy with snow white hair getting out of the passenger's side of the same car. "Hey," he goes under his breath, leaning towards me, as if to make sure the boy won't hear him. "There's that white haired kid. The guy that just moved into-"

Fish isn't able to finish his sentence because Jack notices me before he can, making it plainly obvious that he recognizes me. As our eyes meet, a smile appears on his face, his blue eyes standing out like a sore thumb against his pale complexion. He raises a hand, waving it a bit, and calls out my name.

"Hey! Hiccup!"

Fish grabs my arm, pulling me to a stop as I wave lazily back to Jack. "Waitâ€¦| youâ€¦| you\_ know\_ him?"

"Yeah," I say softly. "We talked once, like, a couple of days ago. I helped him outta a tree."

"You \_what?" \_

"Let's not talk about it, okay?"

Next thing I know, Jack's jogging up to the both of us, looking cautiously both ways before crossing the parking lot. The older man - whom I assume is probably his dad - gives him a quizzical look as he approaches the entrance to The Ring, but Jack just waves him off with his hand and a smile. The man doesn't seem to protest by the way he nods and heads to the ordering station in the shade.

"Hey," Jack greets me again, now standing in front of us. I register that this kid's about the size of Fish, if not an inch shorter, which sucks, since now that means they're \_both\_ towering over me.

"Hey, Jack," I greet him back. "Uhâ€¦| I don't believe you two have



met?"

Jack shakes his head as Fish gives me a curious look.

"Fish, this is Jack. He just moved into Mildew's old place outta town," I explain. "And Jack. This is Fish. We're, uhâ€¦ we're friends."

"Wow," Jack goes with a laugh. "Does\_ everyone\_ in this town have weird names?"

I'm almost completely blown away by this remark, since I honestly can say I did\_ not\_ see it coming. Fish though, thank the gods, takes it all in stride.

"It's a nickname," he tells Jack with a shrug. "Childhood nicknames die hard, you know?"

Jack nods, but by the look on his face, I can tell he doesn't know.

"So, uhâ€¦ what are you up to then?" I ask, trying to keep the conversation flowing. I notice his dad at the ordering stand, pointing up at the menu as he probably places his order with the young girl behind the counter. "I've never seen you, like, \_in \_town before."

"My dad took me out shopping!" Jack tells us, sounding rather excited about something so mundane. "I mean, it was for, uhâ€¦ hardware I think it's called? Hammers and tools and stuff like that. Is that kind of stuff called hardware?"

Fish nods his head, telling Jack he's got the right word, but I can't help but wonder how this guy could possibly not know the meaning to the word "hardware". Last time we had talked, it had been about what a predicament was, which was understandable, but now he's asking what \_hardware \_is? Geez. I wonder what this kid's problem with words is?

"But now we're out getting lunch," Jack continues to explain, running his hand through his hair. "He said he heard something about this place having really good hamburgers from someone at his work. Thought we'd try it out."

"And that is so true," Fish confirms. "I highly suggest the number five, if your dad hasn't already ordered for you. It has juuuuust the right amount of everything on it, so it's really great."

"He orders it every time we come here," I add in.

"Well, then I'll definitely try it out," Jack says with a smile. "Have you guys already eaten?"

"Oh yeah, we just ate," Fish tells him. "But now we're thinking of heading over to the indoor skate park around here. Wanna join?"

I can't help but give Fish a side glance, trying to get through to him that inviting this guy along was most definitely not something I was encouraging him to do. All he does in return though is give me a confused look, like he doesn't quite understand why I wouldn't want

to invite Jack along. Now that I think about it, I don't blame him for thinking this; only moments ago, I was introducing Jack to him like the two of us were on good terms, which I'm not saying we aren't. It's more of just that I don't know him well enough to consider him even really an acquaintance. And, not going to lie, I still get this uncomfortable vibe from him. Be it from his awkward tendencies or some other weird reason, but whatever it is, I can't seem to shake it.

"Really? You wantâ€¦ you want \_me\_ to come along with you guys?" Jack asks us, appearing not to have noticed Fish's and my little internal exchange. By the toothy grin that occupies his white face, I can tell that Jack really \_is\_ just as excited and honored to be asked to join us as he sounds.

Fish just shrugs, obviously not noticing Jack's enthusiasm, like moi. "Sure. I mean, why not? You're new here and we've both lived here our entire lives." He nudges me in the side, maybe to tell me to lighten up a bit. "Who's more qualified to show you around than us?"

Jack, honest to the gods, looks like he's about to erupt with happiness any second now. "Okay! Okay! Yeah! Let me go ask my father if it's okay andâ€¦ and yeah! Stay right here!" Before Fish can even get a simple nod out in confirmation, Jack is sprinting across the parking lot and towards the ordering station, where his dad is now waiting for his order.

"He's quite the excitable one, isn't he?" Fish asks as he chuckles at the white haired boy.

I shake my head, pinching the bridge of my nose. "You don't even know."

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After confirming with my father that I could go out with these two boys for the remainder of the afternoon, the bigger, blond boy that goes by Fish tells us we should split up so that him and Hiccup can go gather their bikes. Because this place these two keep referring to as a "skate park" is closer to Fish's house than Hiccup's, they suggest I tag along with Fish, so I won't have to walk as far as a distance, seeing as I don't have a bike to ride.

Fish is a pretty respectable conversationalist I discover; there isn't a moment where neither of us aren't talking. He does a larger majority of the talking however, but I really don't mind. What he talks about mostly is the history of the town Berk and little facts that I assume strike him as interesting. He even tells me that his father runs a business not far away from the skate park we're heading to.

"He's a travel agent," he explains as we turn on to a street that I assume is his.

"What's that?" I ask.

Before answering, I notice him give me this inquisitive look, like he doesn't know whether to believe the fact that I don't know what this "travel agent" occupation truly is. I want to tell him about my situation, that new words escape me easily, so he won't thinkâ€¦ well, anything negative towards me, but he answers before I can speak up.

"It's someone who, likeâ€¦ helps other people decide where they're going on their travels. Like, how they're going to get there, what they'll do there. Stuff like that."

I nod my head, happy that he was willing enough to explain and not question me on not knowing what I guess is a pretty simple term. "And what about Hiccup?" I proceed to ask. "What does his father do?"

We come to a stop in front of a cozy, two-story home, a wooden porch with matching swing surrounding the front and curling around the side. There are no cars in the driveway, and all the lights inside the sheltered looking home seem to be off, so I assume no one is home at the moment.

"He runs his own business. Started it right out of college waaay back when," Fish explains as we make out way towards the adjoined garage. "He's a car rental dealer. Rents cars out to people who are vacationing around here."

"People vacation here?" I ask. Don't get me wrong, Berk is a pleasant place - charming sunsets every evening and even an acceptable excuse for a beach - but I just can't see someone wanting to vacation in a place like this.

"Sometimes," Fish tells me with a laugh, most likely understanding why I ask such a question. As we approach the garage door, he presses four keys on a little pad positioned next to closed door, and after a beep, the door begins to rise. "They're mostly just people passing through that need to car for, like, a day or something. He has pretty good business though, surprisingly, so I guess that's all that matters, right?"

We step into the crowded garage, boxes on top of boxes in every corner, almost reaching the popcorn ceiling, a weird smell of oil and some foreign scent crawling into my nostrils. As I take this place and all that's in it in, Fish wanders over towards the back where I see a bike rack stationed, holding four bikes of every size.

"Which one's yours?"

He places his hand on the medium sized gray bike with light brown and purple stripes on it. "This beauty right here," he tells me, taking it down from its place on the rack and on to the ground. "I call her the Gronckle. She's a mountain bike, so she does better on rough terrain, but she can manage street biking pretty well too."

As he puts on some weird gloves with no fingers, I walk up and touch the handlebars of this bike he calls the Gronckle. They're tougher than the bike I have back home, but that may be because they've been put to more use than mine has.

"Have you seen Hiccup's bike yet?" Fish asks me, now flexing his gloved fingers.

I simply nod my head, vaguely remembering the smaller black bike Hiccup had been wheeling around on a couple of days prior to now.

"Yeah. He calls it the \_Night Fury,"\_ Fish goes on, motioning me to follow him with his bike out of the garage and into the empty driveway. "It's a racing bike, so it goes a\_ lot\_ faster than, say, my huge lug of metal here. But that's okay. I'm not much into racing."

"I take it he is though," I say as Fish presses another button on the key pad and the garage door begins to close.

"Oh yeah. He \_looooooves\_ to race. Did more of it back when we were in middle school, but then he got in this nasty accident one day and he stopped biking altogether."

Waitâ€¦| \_what?\_

Hiccup was in an \_accident?\_

"But he bought the Night Fury sometime during freshman year from a scrap yard, and ever since then, he's just been fixing it up to race again." Fish doesn't seem to notice me pondering over his earlier words as he continues on. "Now all he can manage to think about it-"

"You said he got in an accident," I interrupt, not being able to hold back any longer; the curiosity of what happened to the smaller boy is eating at me for some reason, and I don't know why.

Fish suddenly looks like he regrets his chose of words. "Umâ€¦| yeah," he says slowly, not making eye contact with me anymore. "Back in seventh grade. Iâ€¦| I don't know if, uhâ€¦| if I should-"

To my dismay, Fish isn't able to finish his explanation, because Hiccup rolls up on his bike at that very moment, asking us if we're ready to get going. I can tell that Fish is relieved to not have to explain what he meant earlier to me, and I try, to my best efforts, to not let that bug me.

After a good ten minutes of them biking slow enough for me to keep up - and several occasions were Fish asked if I was sure I didn't need a ride - we finally arrive at the skate park. It ends up to be just a monotone brick building with worn out letters I can't even read on the side, but the two boys assure me that the inside is a lot more satisfying than the outside, so I follow them through the glass door, out of the torturous summer heat and into relieving air conditioning.

If I were into biking as much as Fish and Hiccup are, I can honestly say that I would've loved this place at first glance. The main room, that I assume makes up the entirety of the building, is spacious and empty, minus the obstacles that have been placed out for the skaters and bikers - little humps and metal bars aimlessly placed ever so often around the floor, a large wooden structure that resembles half of an open pipe near the back, and an open bowl imprinted right in the center. Several other teens - mostly boys I notice, but a few girls as well - are already occupying the space, darting in and out

of the bowl and dodging one another as they glide across the concrete flooring.

"No bike for Jack?" I hear Hiccup ask Fish beside me as I take this new scene in. I take it that Fish shakes his head to his friend, because I feel Hiccup poke me in the arm and say, "You okay with just watching?"

"Oh. Yeah. No problem," I answer, only half hearing what he asked me. A small laugh escapes his lips before he darts off into the chaos, Fish in his wake.

Watching the two maneuver their ways around everyone else is something like watching Emma make one of her card towers; even though I feel like I shouldn't be impressed, I truly am. It may have something to do with me not being able to remember anything, therefore making pretty much everything impressive in my eyes, but I don't question it. I enjoy being easily impressed.

Hiccup though. He definitely knows what he's doing on that bike of his, that's for sure. Watching him drop in and pop out of the bowl, his tongue sticking out of his mouth as he does so in concentration, makes me believe that biking is as easy to him as breathing is to someone like me. I can't help but notice his prosthetic leg though - that's what Emma told me it's called, after I questioned her about it - and wonder how; how is he able to bike with a piece of metal replacing his real leg? Can't he not feel anything with it, therefore making it more difficult to do, wellâ€¦ anything really?

I find my way over towards a rake supporting a good dozen of bikes instead of dwelling on all these questions I know I probably can't get answers to right now, their owners all resting on a bench against the wall a few paces away, taking sips from water bottles and chatting it up with one another. One of the boys - a larger one with wiry brown hair - is the loudest of the bunch though, spitting out words so loud I'm sure I could've heard them from outside the venue.

I look away from the boys and see Hiccup pedaling his way slowly up to me, his body risen off of his bike's seat. "You sure you don't wanna try this out?" he asks, whipping his auburn bangs out of his green eyes. "There're some bikes and skates and stuff in the back for people that don't bring anything. I'm sure I can convince Dagur to let you borrow one. I mean, for a price, but y'know."

As much as I seriously want to follow up with his offer, I shake my head. "No, that's fine," I assure him. "It's fun watching."

He gives me a skeptical look, like he's seeing right through my smile. "You sure?"

"Yeah," I assure him. "Don't worry about it."

With nothing but a shrug, he turns on his bike, making his way back over to where Fish is attempting to do some weird move on one of the pipe structures. As Hiccup bikes passed him, he raises a hand and Fish slaps it with his own, a large smile on his wide face as he pulls his bike into the air and on top of the pipe, only to clumsily stumble off of it, nearly falling off his bike. Hiccup, who's already made a reasonable amount of distance from his friend, sees this and

bursts out laughing, yelling something to Fish that I can't hear.

Now that I think about it, I probably should've taken Hiccup up on his offer. Despite the fact that I've never actually ridden a bike before, I'm sure I wouldn't embarrass myself too badly, right?

I back up more against the wall, and in the process, manage to nearly trip over my own feet. Normally, this wouldn't be a problem, but it suddenly \_becomes\_ a problem when I accidentally make contact with the bikes in the bike rack, causing the first to fall sideways and on to the one sitting beside it. It's horrible to watch, each bike knocking the next one over, like a game of Dominos. As they all crash, voices become hushed and heads begin to turn in my direction.

I don't think I've ever wanted to become invisible more than right now.

"Hey!" I hear someone shout from my left. My head turns in the direction of the sound, and there's that large boy with the wiry hair, marching over towards the rack, his eyes wide with horror. He bends down and surveys the last bike in the row, now lying on the concrete floor. After a moment of looking it over, his head snaps up at me and he lets out a loud, "What the \_hell\_, man! You ruined my paint job!" The boy gets up, practically throwing down his bike as he makes his way towards me. I back up, nearly tripping over my own darned feet again as his arms are coming up from his sides to grab me. I'm in shock, unaware of what I should do before this guy lays his hands on me, but then his hands recoil at the sound of a bike skidding to a stop and someone yelling out, "NO, LOUT!"

Both our heads, along with everyone else watching, turn in the direction of the voice, and there's Hiccup, jumping off of his bike and running towards me. By the way Lout meets him half way, his anger showing in every one of his heavy steps, I can tell that these two boys know each other already.

"He \_ruined\_ my bike!" the bigger boy yells down at Hiccup.

"Oh, he didn't \_ruin\_ it," Hiccup says back nonchalantly, rolling his eyes. "He probably just chipped the paint. No big deal."

Fish pedals up then, stopping besides Hiccup's abandoned bike, looking worriedly at his friend. I begin to wonder if I should feel worried for him too.

"No. Big. \_Deal?"\_ the boy yells back, his hands forming into fists. At seeing this, a tugging feeling begins to form in my stomach. "Do you have \_any\_ idea\_ how much that paint job \_cost\_ me?"\_

"Way more than it should've, no doubt."

The boy's hand darts up and jabs Hiccup in the chest, causing him to stumble back, but luckily he catches himself before falling backwards. "\_He's\_ here with \_you\_,\_ isn't he?"

"Wellâ€¦ y-yeah. What of it?"

"He's gonna have to pay, you know."

"Okay, fine," Hiccup sighs, whacking the boy's meaty finger away from his chest. "How much does he owe you? It couldn't have been \_too-\_"

\_"Not\_ with money," the boy says, looking over towards me and narrowing his small eyes.

There's a brief silence, until I hear Hiccup firmly state, "No way."

I suppose this guy isn't used to being told no, because he looks shocked as his head snaps away from me and back down at Hiccup. \_"What\_ did you just say?"

"I-Iâ€¦ I said no," Hiccup repeats himself, not sounding nearly as confident as before. "He can't fight you, Lout. I-It wouldn't be fair."

"Who ever said anything about it being \_fair?\_"

I have the sudden impulse to step in and defend myself, since I can see that Hiccup is losing his firm footing with this boy he calls Lout. As I step towards the two of them though, Hiccup shoots me a side glance, warning me not to make another move. Something in his eyes, the pure urgency of them, makes me stop what I had been planning on doing.

"Let him race you," I hear Hiccup say, looking back up at Lout. "That way it'll be fair."

Lout seems to actually be considering this, turning his head slowly towards me and looking me up and down. This awfully devilish grin appears on his face, and I feel my stomach turn inside of me again. I want to speak up - tell Hiccup to stop what he's doing - but I can't get the words to come out.

"Fine," Lout spits down at Hiccup. "Next Saturday. Usually place. Or do you need to be \_reminded\_ where we usually race, seeing as you haven't been around to race lately." Two blonde haired twins - one a boy and the other a girl - still sitting on the bench against the wall let out loud snickers as Lout's smirk grows.

"No, but thanks anyway," Hiccup spits back, sarcastically. "I remember where it is."

"Good." As Lout turns to go back to his beat up bike, he bumps shoulders rather aggressively with Hiccup, almost causing the smaller boy to lose his balance completely. I dart over towards him, Fish doing the same, as everyone listening in on the earlier argument disburses and goes back to skating.

"You alright?" Fish asks his friend, patting him on the back.

"Yeah, yeah, don't worry about me," Hiccup replies, rubbing his shoulder. "I'm used to him pushing me around. We just need to worry about you now." He looks up at me, letting out a slight sigh. "At least I know you have an awesome racing bike, so the chances of you getting slaughtered by him are in single digits."

"Uhâ€¦ about thatâ€¦" I say slowly, not being able to make eye

contact with either of them all of the sudden. "I, uhâ€¦ I didn't tell you guys something that I, uhâ€¦ probablyâ€¦ should've mentionedâ€¦"

I notice the two exchange looks out of the corner of my eye.

"Aaaand what's that?"

I heave out a large sigh, closing my eyes as the words escape my mouth.

"I don't know how to ride a bike."

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The entire time I bike Jack back to his house, him trailing close behind, it feels like I have something caught in my throat. Luckily for me, Fish does me a favor and talks with Jack for the first half of the trip, filling him in on who Lout is and what he's going to need to do now that he has to race against him. Once we reach Fish's house though and he leaves our little pack, it's just Jack and me alone for the long ride to his house.

I hadn't known that challenging Lout to race Jack was going to led to this. I mean, the kid's got a bike - and freaking amazing racing bike at that - so naturally I assumed he already knew how to ride it. I guess I assumed wrong? I thought what would end up happening is that I would help Jack a little by giving him some tips - easy stuff about speed and stuff like that. But then I discover the kid can't even ride a bike.\_ Dang. Now I'm just lost on what to do.

"Are you mad at me?"

I almost put on the brakes he catches me so off guard. Turning my head back and to an angle, I'm able to see him walking behind me; he has his hands stuffed into his shorts pockets, his head held in a downcast so I can just barely see the blue of his yes.

I let out a sigh. "Kindaâ€¦ but not really, no."

He looks back down at the ground after making brief eye contact with me, making his face turn from a dark white to an even darker gray. "Sorryâ€¦"

Pressing on my brakes, I'm glide back to where I'm not too far ahead, making it easier to talk with him. "No, no. You of all people shouldn't be sorry."

"But I knocked over the bikes. I'm the one at-"

"And that was an accident," I tell him before he can finish. "And, y'knowâ€¦ people make mistakes sometimes. I mean, if you don't, then you're probably not human, right?"

"Iâ€¦ I guessâ€¦"



"Lout's just a jerk who thinks he has something to prove," I breathe, edge in my tone. "Andâ€¦ and besides. If anyone's to blame here, it's me. I got you into this mess by challenging him." I sigh again, looking away from Jack's sulking figure and down at the ground slowly rolling beneath my feet. "Gods. We should've just walked away when we had the chance. Now we're in \_this\_ mess."

"It's not your fault either," I hear Jack tell me in a quiet voice. Looking away from the ground and back up at him, I see that his blue eyes are locked on mine. "Youâ€¦ you didn't know I couldn't bike."

Something about him saying those words - the words that have led us into this dilemma in the first place - makes me feel a little uneasy. I can tell he feels the same way as well by the way he drops his gaze and looks back down at the ground, kicking a rock with the bottom of his shoe. I want to say something, words of encouragement and how he's going to do fine, but I know to attempt this would be useless. We both know that there's physically no way that he could possibly win a race against Lout.

Jack's house comes into view and I'm about to say my farewell, when Jack turns towards me in a jerky manner, looking a little bewildered about something I apparently haven't thought of yet.

"What is-" I begin, dropping my feet to the ground, but he answers me first.

"What ifâ€¦ what if \_you\_ taught me how to bike?"

Uhhâ€¦

"What if I \_what\_?"

"Think about it," he goes on, his apparent excitement growing with each of his words. "Fish tells me you're a really good racer, so who better to learn from than you?"

"Jack, Iâ€¦ I dunnoâ€¦"

"And Fish told me that the track you guys race on is made of dirt, so this road right here in front of my house could work perfectly too!"

"Jackâ€¦"

"You could teach me! This could actually \_work,\_ Hiccup!"

He stops walking right before approaching his mailbox, this big, goofy grin on his face as he probably searches mine for some reaction. All the emotion that I can manage to feel however is that same uneasy feeling from before.

I meanâ€¦ I \_guess\_ I could help him learn to race. It means we'd have to start from scratch though, which also means I'd have to put a lot of time into teaching him, because racing someone with as much skill and determination as Lout isn't going to come naturally, I can already tell. Putting that much time into this may be a little tricky too, considering work and just personal time for myself. Now that I

really think about it though, I probably owe this to Jack. Yeah, the kid's a little odd and socially awkward, and I still get this weird nervous feeling whenever I'm around him, like I don't know if I should expect something to happen, but I was the one that got him into this mess anyways, despite what he says about it not being my fault, so I should at least try and do something to make this easier on him.

Meeting his eyes again, I lean forward and rest my arms on my handlebars. "Wellâ€¦ if we're going to do thisâ€¦ when should we meet up?"

The look on his face is priceless as he literally begins to glow and does a quick, lame attempt at a fist pump in the air, managing to get a smile out of me. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank yooooou!" he cheers. "And, uh, what about tomorrow? Does tomorrow sound good?"

"Iâ€¦ guess tomorrow would work fine," I say. "But I'd have to do it sometime in the afternoon."

"Why?"

"Work."

"Ah. Right."

After some discussion, we decide on two tomorrow afternoon. That way, I'll have some time after getting let out from work to eat, shower, and get some rest before heading to his place. We don't worry about what bike he'll be using either, because that must should be obvious.

"Guess I'll see you tomorrow then?" he goes as I place my feet on my pedals, ready to head out.

"Sounds 'bout right." I turn my bike back towards home. "Get some rest, okay?"

He shoots me one of his smiles, showing off all of his pearly white teeth as he starts heading towards his house. "Alright. You too, Hic."

Raising an eyebrow as he walks off, I can honestly say I'm a little surprised at him slyly putting that nickname in there after just knowing me forâ€¦ geez, how long have known each other anyways?

As I bike home, I give myself the pleasure of being able to enjoy the scenery rather than over thinking everything that's happened today. I pedal quickly pass Astrid's house, not even bothering to see if her bedroom light is on or not. On arriving home though, my leisured ride is cut to an end when I see an unfamiliar car sitting in the driveway. As I walk pass it and into the driveway to put my bike away, I remember my dad mentioning that someone was coming over for dinner sometime this week earlier last week. Wish I had known it was tonight; I wouldn't have stayed out so late. He's probably going to give some quiet lecture about it later as our guest is off in the bathroom or something.

"Daaaaad?" I go, opening the door leading from the garage and into

the kitchen. There's no reply, but I hear Toothless scamper down the stairs and towards me, meowing like crazy. "I know, I know," I go, scooping him into my arms and allowing him to rub his mane against my face. "Sorry I'm home so late, bud. Won't happen again, I promise."

"Hiccup?" I hear come from the backdoor. I turn, and there's my dad, poking his head through the slightly opened sliding glass door. "Ah. Thought that was you."

"Hey, Dad," I greet him, setting Toothless down. "Sorry I'm late. I had to walk someone home and it took some time. Whose car is that out in the driveway anyway?"

"Oh. A, uhâ€¦ a colleague of mine," he explains walking into the kitchen, keeping the door open behind him. "Do you, umâ€¦ want any dinner? I picked up some brisket from the store before coming home. Thought you might want some."

"Sure, yeah, but I, uhâ€¦"

I'm not able to finish what I was trying to say because a woman, maybe around my height with thick, light brown hair, appears in the opened door. Her eyes are locked on my dad as she opens her mouth to speak, but when her eyes land on me, her eyes widen along with her smile.

"Oh, you must be Hiccup!" she says, announcing her presence to my dad, who jumps a little at her sudden voice. "Your old man here's told me so much about you."

"Oh, uhâ€¦ hiâ€¦" I say back, not quite sure how to respond to that.

"Hiccup, this is, umâ€¦ this is Bertha. Bertha Bog," my dad fills me in as the woman squeezes her way into the house. "We just hired her a couple weeks ago. Thought I'd, uhâ€¦ have her over for dinner. A welcome to the neighborhood greeting of some sort."

"Which was so kind of your father, if you don't mind me saying," Bertha laughs, patting my dad on the shoulder playfully.

Okayâ€¦ that's kind of weird.

"Wellâ€¦ if you want to join us, we're eating outside then," my dad tells me as Bertha sneaks her way back outside. "We're mainly talking business, so it may be good for you to listen in. May learn a thing or two."

I see exactly what he's trying to do, and there's no way in hell I'm playing into it. "Nah, that's okay," I tell him instead, grabbing a plate from the cupboard. "I had a long day. Thinking of just eating, then going to bed. Thanks though."

My dad's mouth opens slightly and I can tell he wants to say something that'll make me have to join him outside, but he doesn't say it. Instead, all that manages to come out is, "Ah. Okay. Wellâ€¦ 'night then, son."

"Yeah. 'Night, Dad."

He wanders back outside, sliding the door shut and even closing it a little harder than I think is necessary. I try to not let this action bother me, like me skipping dinner to avoid talking work with him is obviously bothering him. Piling a few slabs of brisket on my plate, I can still hear the two adults exchanging words outside, and even see them for the most part out of the window.

Toothless rubs up against my calf, purring and looking up at me with those big green eyes of his that always win when it comes to him begging for food.

"Ah, fine," I give in, cutting off a slab of brisket and allowing it to fall to the kitchen floor. Without a second hesitation, Toothless is all over it, looking up at me afterwards, asking for me to drop another slab. I bend down, stroking the back of his ears and head, and he meows like he's telling me this will have to do for the lack of seconds.

I stand up, about ready to head upstairs and call it a day, when I make the grave mistake of glancing over at the window peering outside. Right before my eyes, I see this Bertha woman - this woman I've never seen before \_in my life\_ until today - lean over and kiss my dad right on the kisser.

What in \_Thor's name\_!

I don't even bother to wait to see how my dad will react. Without a second thought and having almost tripped on the way up the stairs on my prosthetic leg, I head upstairs and lock myself in my room for the rest of the night.

## 6. Learning From the Best

**\*\*And here's the moment you've all been waiting for!\*\***

Jack's section this chapter is waaaaaaaaaaaaay longer than poor Hiccup's, but that's because I thought the whole learning-to-ride-a-bike experience would be interesting to see through Jack's eyes. And yes, only one paragraph for each boy this time. This chapter ended up being a \_lot\_ longer than I expected by the time I got to the end, so yeah.

Hope you all enjoy reading! And don't be afraid to write me a review ! I love hearing back from you guys!

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That next morning, it's Emma that wakes me up instead of my internal alarm clock. She seems rather enthusiastic, despite the early hour and the fact that I'm groaning about wanting to go back to bed as she drags me downstairs. I quickly understand why she's so excited though as we enter the kitchen. Apparently, while looking around for some breakfast to eat, she stumbled upon our mother's colossal cook book and took it upon herself to flip through its numerous pages. While

doing this, she found a recipe she had been desperate to find.

"Chocolate chip pancakes!" she exclaims, grabbing the book from off the counter and shoving it towards me as I stumble through the kitchen threshold. "We're going to make chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast, okay, Jack?"

I can't think of any reason to say no, so I sent her a sleepy smile and say, "Sure thing, kiddo."

Making the pancakes takes some time we discover, seeing as neither of us have ever had to legitimately cook anything before in our lives. Besides all the confusion over the cooking terms I'm not aware of and the horrible mess we leave behind, our chocolate chip pancakes are a thousand times better than our usual Cheerios and toast.

After eating and cleaning up our cooking chaos, we get ready for the day and wander outside to soak up some sun. We get out some chalk our father had bought for us over the weekend and play some hopscotch, a game that Emma's very fond of that's also grown on me. Once the heat proves to be unbearable though, we go lay in the hammock under our oak tree.

"Maybe we can bring a board game out," Emma suggests, curled up in my arms as we sway gently back and forth. "We can set up under the umbrella on the patio so we don't get too hot and sweaty and gross."

I ask her for the time, and she looks down at her little purple watch, telling me it's nearly noon now and asking me why I ask.

"I promised someone I would hang out with them today," I explain. "He's supposed to be coming over here at around two."

"Oh." I can tell by her tone that she's a little bummed to hear this, and I try to assure her that we can play all the board games she wants tomorrow, but she stops me. "It's okay, Jack," she tells me with her sweet smile. "I'm actually going over to a friend's house to play anyways, so it's fine."

"Oh yeah?" I say, surprised to hear this. After two weeks and a half of us living in Berk, not once as Emma ever told me she has a friend. I wonder where she met themâ€¦

Emma gives me this look, like my surprised tone is greatly unappreciated. I have a hard time not letting out a smile as she says, "Yeah, I am going over to a friend's house, thank you for asking, dummy pants. Her name's Hannah and she lives down the street from us."

"What time do you need to be there?"

"One o'clock."

"How are you going to get there?"

"I was just going to walk. It's really not that far away from here."

"Are you sure? I could walk-"

"Jack, it's fine!" She wraps her small arms around me, encasing me in a hug, her soft hair rubbing up against the bottom of my chin. "I can take care of myself. You go have fun with your friend."

I smile and kiss her lightly on the top of her head. "If you say so."

After a brief moment of enjoying the sounds of the peaceful summer surrounding us, Emma asks me about my new friend, and I tell her as much as I can about him. As I explain the quirky boy I only met a couple of days ago to her, I realize that I honestly don't know as much as I thought about him - at least not personality wise - which bugs me for some odd reason.

He's a little short, I tell her, but I don't know how old he is, so he may be of average height for his age. He enjoys bike riding and he's rather good at it - mostly when it comes to speed though. He strikes me as shy, but I feel if you get to know him, he opens up. He's covered in freckles from head to toe, he has gaped front teeth, really, really green eyes, and his name is Hiccup.

"\_Hiccup\_?" Emma asks, a series of giggles coating her words. "His name is \_Hiccup\_?"

I nod.

"Well, \_that's\_ a funny name."

"It's not his real name," I explain to her. "It's just a nickname. Kind of like his friend, who goes by Fish. Just a childhood nickname that stuck."

"Hiccup has a friend named \_Fish\_?"

I nod again.

"Wow," Emma goes under her breath. "The teenagers here have weird names."

"Tell me about it."

I feel her roll on to her stomach beside me, now nestling her chin into the crook of my armpit. "Do you think I could meet him?" she asks, her brown eyes brimming with curiosity.

"Maybe someday," I tell her. "Probably not today though."

She pouts at me, her eyebrows furrowed. "Why can't I meet him today?"

"Because \_you\_ have a friend's house to go to, that's why," I remind her, reaching out and pinching the tip of her nose, causing her eyes to squint up and a smile to form on her face.

"When can I meet him then?" she continues through giggles. "You gotta remember that I'm leaving for camp at the beginning of July, so I'm gonna be gone soon!"

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that. When are you coming back?"

"I'll be gone aaaaaall month."

"Well, if you're not able to meet him before you leave, you can just meet him once you get back. I promise."

"But \_Jaaaaack\_-"

"Hey, hey," I laugh, pulling my fingertips through her hair to shush her. "You'll be able to meet him one day, okay, kiddo? He lives here too, so it's not like he's \_going\_ anywhere."

She just stares at me, her eyes squinted as she searches my face to make sure I'm not lying to her. I'm about to reassure her that I said I had promised she'd be able to meet him one day, when she lets out a sigh and simply says, "You better not be playing any tricks on me, Jack."

It's hard to not smile at her comment. "Would I ever trick you?"

She replies with sticking her tongue out at me.

At that point, I hear Emma's stomach begin to growl and suggest we go inside to get something to eat. Without a second thought, the little girl jumps up from my arms and begins skipping towards the back door, singing something about having peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch, which I know is her favorite.

Luckily for us, making our sandwiches proves to be less of a challenge than our pancakes earlier that morning, but that's mainly because I have more practice with slicing bread and spreading peanut butter and jelly. Emma pours both of us glasses of lemonade as I finish up, and we enjoy our lunch together on the back porch in the shade, playing a few games of Twenty Questions, in which Emma beats me brutally at.

As one approaches, we head back inside and I clean the dishes with Emma's help with drying. She tells me about her new friend Hannah as we work, telling me she ran into her while playing out in the front lawn the day my mother took me to the dentist. Apparently the two girls bonded instantly and are now on the friendship level of being able to have play dates.

"Is that what you and Hiccup are having today?" Emma asks me as I walk her out to our mailbox, the beginning point of her journey to Hannah's house. "Are you guys having a play date?"

"Iâ€¦ don't think that term works for kids my age," I explain, running my hand through my hair.

"Well, what term would work for 'kids your age' then?"

I shrug, unable to think of a proper term. "Em, you know I'm not good with words."

She shoots me a smile. "I know."

After kissing her on the top of her head and telling her to be safe,

she marches off down the dirt street towards the small ranch house that I can barely see on the horizon - this house, Emma told me, being Hannah's. Once I'm barely able to tell it's Emma I'm watching, I head back towards the garage. I know Hiccup isn't due here for another hour or so, but I may as well get ready for when he arrives.

I take my bike down from its rack, being extra careful to not drop or scratch it. Walking out of the garage and into to the driveway, I head towards this huge tree on the edge of our lot; its branches fan out in all directions, its leaves large and thick, great for blocking out sunlight. As I wheel my bike over to it, propping it up against its thick trunk and taking a seat at its base, I remember that I should've probably put on some sunscreen, since my naturally white complexion has recently turned into more of a light pink due to all the sunlight I've been getting lately. My mother lectured me about this the other night after coming home from my skate park adventure, saying something about how "people like me" shouldn't be getting as much sun as I've been getting, since we burn easily. I didn't quite understand what she meant by "people like me", but I didn't question her - I just nodded and said I would remember to put this sunscreen substance on next time I went out.

I'm about to get up and run inside to apply the weird, white cream Emma introduced to me last night when I see a faint figure in the distance, moving faster than someone traveling on foot. As I get up from the ground, I can see auburn hair whirling around their head, and I smile.

"You're early," I tell Hiccup as he pulls to a stop a few feet in front of me.

"Yeeeeeah. Woke up from my nap earlier than I expected," he explains. He uses his prosthetic leg to kick a weird metal rod out from the side of his bike with his foot. After dismounting, the bike doesn't tip over; I assume that this rod may have something to do with this.

"So, uhâ€¦" I hear Hiccup go. He claps his hands together, nervousness and maybe a little discomfort imbedded in his eyes. "We should probably get started." After I nod and head back to the tree to retrieve my bike, I hear him add on, "Do you have any gear?"

Turning back towards him, my bike in hand, I give him a confused look.

"Gear," he goes on, looking a little worried. "Likeâ€¦ a helmet andâ€¦ knee and elbow pads."

I think for a moment, and when the image of all those kids at the skate park wearing those weird hard-hat looking things and Fish putting on those gloves while in his garage snap into my mind, I snap my fingers at him - something my dad does a lot when he remembers things. "

Yeah, yeah, yeah! I think we have something like that," I tell him. "Let me just go get them."

After running and gathering up all the gear that looks like it would



be needed to ride a bike, I venture back out in the front lawn, where Hiccup is waiting for me.

"Is this everything I'll need?" I ask, showing him the gear in my arms.

He shuffles through the items and nods his head slowly, flipping his hair out of his eyes. "Yep. You got a helmet, knee and elbow pads, and gloves." He grabs a pair of huge, turquoise and white themed goggles that just so happened to be included the pile, and stares at them with a confused look on his face.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Why exactly did you bring out \_scuba\_ goggles?"

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. He's giving me this weird look, and I get this constricting feeling in my chest as he places them back in my arms.

"I thoughtâ€¦ I don'tâ€¦ maybe I would need them?"

He throws me this smirk and chuckles a bit, shaking his head. "Yeah. Maybe if we were taking a ride \_underwater\_. But, last I checked, we're not, so, uhâ€¦ I think we can do without 'em."

"Okay." I toss the goggles towards the tree as fast as I can, like they're poison. Geez. Of \_course\_ you don't need goggles for bike riding. How could I be so \_stupid\_?

After that fiasco, Hiccup instructs me on putting on my gear, helping me out a bit when one of the gloves doesn't appear to want to slip on to my hand as easily as we'd like. Now that I'm wearing this clunky helmet on my head, having to push the brim up so I can see, I'll admit, I feel kind of like â€¦ oh, what's the word Emma always uses? Oh yeah. A dork.

"Why do I have to wear this thing?" I ask with a tone, pushing the brim up out of my face again. "\_You're\_ not wearing one."

"Yeah, but that's because, unlike you, I already know how to ride a bike," he explains to me. "It's for your own safety."

I push the brim up again as it begins to slide down into my face. "I don't like it."

"Well, my deepest apologizes, \_your majesty\_. Now, if you're done complaining, let's get started."

Hiccup begins my first bike lesson by explaining each part of the bike to me, starting with the handlebars and the absolute importance of the brakes, to the chain wrapped around the pedals and moving to the back tire. He says something about knowing my bike will help me ride it better, and as peculiar as that sounds to me, I don't doubt him. Out of the two of us, he definitely knows more about bikes than I do, so who am I to question his words.

We then move on to me simply walking while on the bike, as to get a sense of balance. It feels odd at first, attempting to walk while carrying this lug of metal under me, the pedals every once and awhile

pressing up against my calves annoyingly. After a few rounds of going back and forth though, with Hiccup constantly having to remind me to keep my handlebars straight, I grow more and more comfortable.

"Okay, so now we're going to practice gliding," he tells me once I get back to him from my last round. "Luckily this isn't a sloped area, so you'll be able to stop easily. Just gently push off the ground with your feet andâ€¦ glide, I guess."

I nod, lifting one my feet off the gravel. As soon as my other foot leaves the ground however, the entire bike shifts to one side, threatening to flatten me to the ground. My body reacts naturally, quickly planting my feet back at my sides. After gaining back my balance, I shoot Hiccup an embarrassed look, my eyes probably completely hidden under the bothersome brim of my helmet.

He opens his mouth as to say something, but then goes to biting on his lower lip as he studies me. "This, uhâ€¦" he finally says, "may take some timeâ€¦"

Instead of letting me glide on my own, he tells me he's going to help keep my balance until I can do it on my own, which I'm thankful for. Placing one of his hands on my handlebar, right alongside my own hand, and the other on the back of my seat, he tells me to lift my feet off the ground. I do as I'm told, and the next thing I know, I'm gliding, not falling all over myself or anything.

"Put your feet on the pedals, Jack!" Hiccup reminds me hurriedly as he jogs me down the dirt road, and I quickly obey. We only glide for a good forty yards, but after I place my feet back on the security of the ground and Hiccup lets go, I definitely feel more confident.

"If you're going to bike slowly, which is what's gonna happen I assume, you'll need to learn to balance yourself using your handlebars," Hiccup explains to me. He walks up and places his hands next to mine on the handlebars again. "You can do this by gently swaying them back and forth. Like this." He begins to maneuver the handlebar to the left and then to the right, causing the front tire to move along with it.

"Soâ€¦ that'll keep me up?" I ask as he lets go.

"Well, it's not guaranteed or anything," he tells me. "You'll still need to, uhâ€¦ use your body weight to balance yourself. But it'll help."

I nod my head and look down at my feet, sitting on the ground underneath the pedals. Without thinking of what I'm doing, I prop my feet back up on the pieces of metal and lean my weight forward, moving the handlebars like Hiccup just taught me, beginning to pedal gently.

"Jack!" Hiccup yells out, sounding surprised to see my going off by myself, but as soon he sees that I'm moving on my own, none of his assistance required, I hear him let out a laugh and a, "There ya go! That's it!" I concentrate on the handlebar in front of me, thinking about which way the bike's about to lean and quickly turning them in the opposite direction. Things are going fine and I'm beginning to feel proud of myself for getting the hang of this so quickly, until I

hear Hiccup behind me yell, "JACK!" again, and I'm suddenly lying on the ground.

Blinking a couple of times, I find that I'm staring up at the leaves waving down at me in the tree I guess I just ran into. Hiccup's face appears in my vision after a couple confusing seconds, and when I smile up at him, he lets out a sigh.

"How'd I do?" I ask.

"You crashed."

"Yeah, but how'd I do?"

He puts out his hand and I take it, allowing him to help me up. Once I'm up, I straighten my helmet as he bends down and picks up my bike.

"Number one most important rule of bike riding," he tells me, passing the bike to me. "Always - always - look at where you're going. I mean, come on, man."

After that, I'm not allowed to look down at my feet again, just to prevent any more accidents. I do, however, as the practice of gliding continues, find ways to fall off my bike anyways, being knocked off balance by annoyingly nothing. Each time as I hit the dusty ground though, I thank Hiccup in my mind for telling me to wear elbow and knee pads and, more importantly, gloves. Without these gloves, despite how uncomfortable they are, my hands would probably look like I just sent them through a fan on full speed.

It only takes me another five or so minutes to master gliding without falling off my bike or losing balance. As Hiccup announces to me that he thinks it's time to move on to the next step, I can barely control my happiness. I've almost mastered how to ride a bike; and to think that, just about an half hour ago, I hadn't the faintest idea how to. Hiccup may not be the best teacher when it comes to this - he sounds like he's making most of this stuff up as he goes - but at least I'm moving forward, right?

The next step is to move forwards at a faster rate, and Hiccup says he'll be biking alongside me as I do this. He claims it's so he can keep up with me as I go, but I honestly believe it's because he just wants an excuse to get on his bike.

The next ten-ish minutes is full of momentarily keeping balance, looking ahead, and pedaling my feet, only to be met face to face with the ground again. As I fall for the who-knows-how-many'th time, I let out a frustrated groan.

"Hey, chill," Hiccup tells me, rounding his bike back towards me. "Don't expect to be a master at this after just an hour of practicing. I don't think anyone's that fast of a learner."

"Not even you?" I throw back at him, dusting off my knee pads and getting back on my bike.

"Definitely not even me," he says back, letting out a laugh. "I was, like, the most clumsy kid, alright. I mean, I still kinda am, but it was even worse back then."

I lift my feet off the ground and push forward, rotating my feet with the pedals for a good thirty yards before feeling the loss of balance and quickly planting my feet at my sides again.

"Dang itâ€¦"

"It's okay," Hiccup reminds me. "You'll get it."

"When did you learn to ride a bike anyways?" I ask, trying at my balance again.

"Eigh, I think I was about seven or so. My dad was the one that taught me, though he wasn't very good at it."

"I guess you take after him then."

"Hey, you know, I don't have to help you learn how to ride. I could totally just let Lout cream you the day of the race."

The smile on my face fades a little as I realize this fact. "Ohâ€¦ sorryâ€¦"

I hear Hiccup chuckle as I almost lose my balance, but quickly reposition myself, keeping me up right. "It's fine. But anyways. He wasn't very good at teaching me. He even forgot to make sure I was wearing gloves, so this one time, when I fell, I completely skinned up my hands. I didn't get back on that bike for, likeâ€¦ a month afterwards, I was so freaked out by it."

"Wow. Really?"

"Yeah. And, uhâ€¦ my mom was furious at him for it too. Couldn't believe he would let me bike without gloves on."

Losing my balance again, I tip to one side, but quickly catch myself. Hiccup's telling me something about how focusing on something in the distance would help me keep up straight, but all I hear is an illegible version of his voice. I hadn't lost my balance this last time because, well, I had lost my balance, but because a thought that has never occurred to me before presented itself in my mind.

Hiccup had just told me the story of the first time he rode a bike. He elaborated on a specific detail that he remembers even to this day, and he even recalled other people's reactions to it as well. He had told a story that even I could picture in my mind; given I don't know exactly what Hiccup here looked like when he was seven, but it's not that hard to guess. By hearing this story though, I was able to actually imagine, to actually see, someone else's memory.

And I'll never be able to do that with my own.

"Hey. You alright?"

Coming back into reality, I see Hiccup looking over his shoulder, a somewhat concerned expression on as he studies me. The other half of his expression, however, seems impressed, because I've been gliding without somehow stumbling off my bike this entire time.

"Yeah," I assure him with my best attempt at a smile, which I can guarantee is weak and unconvincing. "Just, uhâ€¦ just thinkingâ€¦ about something."

"Best to keep your mind clear when you race," he tells me, turning back towards the road. "Or, in your case, when you're just riding in general. Don't want'cha running into any more trees, now do we."

As I let out a laugh, recalling the earlier memory, Hiccup pulls to a stop, so I follow suit. Looking ahead, I see that we've just reached what appears to be the top of a hill, both of us sitting at the highest point, looking down the long slope.

"Wanna give it a try?" I hear Hiccup ask from beside me.

"What? You meanâ€¦ go down this hill?"

Hiccup shrugs. "If you feel like you're ready. Most of it will just be gliding, but what you'll need to focus on more is brake control. You don't wanna go too fast, right? So-

"I'll need to have my hands on my brakes the entire time," I finish for him.

He gives me a quick nod, impressed that I remembered that from the first portion of my lessons. "Think you can handle that?"

I let out a soft sigh, staring down at the decently slopped hill. Where the road begins to level out, there's a T-section, one end leading back into town a whiles off, the other appearing to be heading into a small patch of wooded area.

"Okay," I finally go. "I'll, uhâ€¦ I'll do it."

Hiccup smiles as he lifts one of his feet off the ground and places it firmly on his pedal. "That's the spirit."

We push off together, and as soon as my bike inches forward, I can feel it picking up an immense amount of speed. I do as Hiccup taught me when we started the lesson and press lightly on the brakes encased in my fingers. To my relief, I begin to slow down, but not too much as to still be rolling at a decent speed down the hill.

"There you go," I hear Hiccup praise me a few yards behind. "Now, if you wanna pick up speed, release the brakes, 'kay?"

I do as he suggests and unwrap my fingers from around the brake. In only seconds, I can feel that I'm going a bit faster than before.

Looking away from my hands, I stare back up at the road, and that's when it hits me. Having all this wind whipping around my face and through my hair sticking out from under this helmet feels freeing, like I can do, oh I don't know, some weird bike trick right now if I really tried. I have to squint my eyes just in order to see Hiccup speeding down a head of me now, his body lifted completely off his seat, his prosthetic leg appearing to be doing as much work as his real one, his arms straight above the handlebars, his auburn hair dancing as he practically stands on his pedals. For some reason, I have the urge to see his face, to see the expression he holds when

he's just simply riding a bike like this.

Hiccup says something back to me, but he doesn't say it loud enough for me to hear over my own thoughts. I'm still looking at him when his head whips back towards me, the expression I was expecting to see on his face not there; instead of a bright smile, his eyes squinted over like me through his messy mane, his eyes are wide as he lets out a yell that I can now hear.

"Jack! Watch out!"

I look forward, and that's when I see it.

A car, heading straight at me.

Without a moment of hesitation, I jerk my handlebars as hard as I can to the right, causing my front wheel and everything else to follow. The car lets out a piercing honk as it swerves around where I had just been, and I even think I hear Hiccup curse out loud as I roll off the road. My front tire comes in contact with some sort of hole, leading to me falling off and landing rather roughly to the rigid, jagged ground, a shocking pain rocketing up my forearm.

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It had all happens so far.

One minute, we're both just gliding down the hill like it's no big deal, the wonderful wind blowing all around me, feeling like I'm about to take off from the ground and fly into the air. Then the next moment, I'm letting out every curse word I know as Jack somehow magically dodges the car that appeared out of almost nowhere, falling straight into a ditch on the other side of the road.

I launch myself off my bike, allowing it to skid to the ground without much care. I hear the car pull to a halt and the sound of a door bursting open reaches my ears as I sprint across the road and jump into the ditch.

Jack's just lying there, his helmet hanging slightly off the side of his head as he holds on to his forearm. I pay no attention to his abandoned bike, now covered in a thick layer of gravel, as I kneel down beside him, straightening the helmet on his head.

"\_Gods\_. Are you alright?" I ask through heavy breaths. "Ah man, that was really close, Jack! You could have \_died\_ if you hadn't dodged that car!"

He looks up at me, his blue eyes still looking a little shocked with what had just happened. "Y-yeah," he tells me, his voice shaking as he speaks. "Yeah. I-I think I just got a little cut. No big deal." Lifting his hand from his arm, he reveals to me a series of about four to five lengthy cuts running down from his shoulder to the top of his elbow pad, trickles of blood seeping out of them.

"Oh, \_wow\_, man," I say, panic beginning to rise in my chest. I

should've been paying more attention to him than I was. Instead of watching his back, I was too busy thinking about what I saw between my dad and Bertha last night; hell, that's all I've managed to think about today when I haven't been instructing Jack with his biking. Some teacher \_I \_am.

"Is it bad?" Jack asks, breaking my train of thought. "Am I going to die?"

"No, you idiot. You're not gonna die," I tell him. "We, uhâ€¦ we really need to get-"

"Heyâ€¦ i-is he okay?"

Both of us turn our heads in the direction of the higher sounding voice in sync, and I come eye to eye with a small girl with short dark hair, bright highlights trailing through certain strands. She's leaned forward, her hands propped up on her knees as she looks worryingly down at the two of us with her huge pink hued eyes.

"Yeah," I reply, trying to get my voice steady again. "Yeah. He just took a-"

"Tooth?"

I look quickly over at Jack, who's now sitting up on his good arm, staring up at the girl with squinted eyes, like he's trying to make sure he isn't mistaken with who she is.

Apparently he isn't, because her eyes get big as she says back, "J-Jack? Waitâ€¦ \_Jack\_"

"You know her?" I ask him, and he gives me series of small nods, not taking his eyes off of the girl. Before I can ask how, he's up on his feet, still clutching on to his damaged arm. His legs are still shaking a bit from his earlier impact, so I wrap my arm around his thin waist as we climb our way out of the ditch together.

"A-are you okay, Jack?" this girl Jack referred to as Tooth asks as we emerge from the hole. "Iâ€¦ I didn't even \_see\_ you. I mean, I guess I didâ€¦ but I assumed you'd move out the way, and then you didn't and I \_totally\_ panicked and-"

"Tooth, Tooth. It's fine," Jack assure her from beside me, somehow managing to put on a decently looking smile after what had just happened. "It's okay. It was my fault."

I look down at his arm to see that some of his blood as transferred itself on to my bare shoulder, leaving a couple small, red blotches on my skin. "So, it's great that you guys are all hunky dory and whatnot, but can we all agree that it doesn't matter \_who\_ caused this and get this kid patched up?" I ask with a hurried tone. "He's getting blood all over me."

The Tooth girl pipes up then, saying she has a first aid kit hidden somewhere in her car, so we follow her to her old Volkswagen two-door just down the street a ways. She's got herself halfway in the car, ripping and tossing things around inside, as I lower Jack to sitting position against the front tire.

"Sorry about this," he apologizes softly. "I should've been watching where I was going."

"Like \_hell\_ you should've," I let out with a laugh, and he smiles back at me.

"Sorryâ€¦"

"It'sâ€¦ it's fine. As long as you're alright, then it doesn't matter." I look over at Tooth, who's now completely disappeared into her car, rummaging through the passenger's seat. "How do you even \_know\_ this chick anyways? I've never seen her before in my life."

"I think her dad's my dentist or something," Jack explains to me, looking briefly over at Tooth, stilling tearing through her car. "I meet her when I went in for a checkup a couple of days ago. We talked some."

"Is her real name \_actually\_ Tooth?"

"Pfft. If her name's actually Tooth, then that means you lied to me and \_your\_ name's actually Hiccup."

Giving him a hard glare, all he does is smirk back at me.

"No, her name's not actually Tooth. She, uhâ€¦ she has a tooth on her necklace. I don't actually know her real name. It was just the first thing that popped into my mind."

"Here it is!" Tooth pulls herself out form the front seat, a small, white box with a red cross made out of duct tape printed clearly on the front. She crouches down on the opposite side of Jack, lifting the lid of the box open. "Do you think band aids will do?"

"I think we're going to need something a little bit bigger than just band aids," I tell her. She leans across Jack to take a look at his cuts, and when she sees them after he removes his now slightly blood stained hand, her eyes grow as wide as a deer's caught in headlights. The small girl instantly goes back to trifling through the box, mumbling something about maybe having some gauze strips somewhere in there. When she successfully finds the gauze and some antibiotic ointment, the two of us switch spots, making it to where she has better access to Jack's wounds.

"What's that?" Jack asks as Tooth rips open one of the antibiotic packets.

I give him a weird look, since who doesn't know what that horrid stuff is - I'm pretty sure every kid while growing up hated that stuff with a burning passion. Jack doesn't see me give him the skeptic look though, because Tooth is telling him it's to make sure his cuts don't get infected.

"Is it going to hurt?" he asks next, looking wearily at the opened packet in her hand.

Tooth looks hesitant, but answers truthfully. "A little."



"It's just gonna sting for a moment," I warn him.

He nods his head and allows his body to tense up as Tooth reaches out for his arm and begins to apply the ointment. He cringes, his pale hands turning into fists as he lets out a hissing sound. Tooth soothes him though with her words, telling him it'll be over soon. I wish there was something for me to do, since, I'll admit, it\_ is\_ partly my fault he's in this mess, but I can't think of anything to do rather than just crouch here and try and be supportive.

Tooth plants one of the gauze strips to the top of Jack's wound, asking me to hold it there as she rips off some tape. She makes fast work of this, getting the entirety of the cut covered in less time than it would've taken me to just cut the first strip of tape.

In no time, Jack's all patched up and is as good as new.

"Thanks for all your help," I say to Tooth once Jack's wandered back towards the ditch to collect his probably brutally damaged bike. "How exactly do you, uhâ€¦ know Jack anyways?"

The dark skinned girl lets out a small grin as she runs her hand through her wavy hair. "Ah. Wellâ€¦ I'm an intern at my dad's dentist office, you see, and he, wellâ€¦ Jack showed my little sis a magic trick." She lets out a laugh, like she can remember the incident like it was yesterday. "And uhâ€¦ he asked me if I was the tooth fairy."

I try to fight from allowing a smile to spread across my face at hearing this, but it's useless. "That seems like something he would ask."

Tooth smiles in return. "Oh really?"

"Yeah. He's uhâ€¦ he's kinda a weirdoâ€¦ honestly."

We both look over as Jack emerges from the ditch with his bike all coated in dirt. Now that I look at it, I guess the "damage" done to it isn't all too bad; nothing a good hose down and a quick polish job can't fix.

"Ever since that day though, I've always wonderedâ€¦ \_why\_ the tooth fairy?" I hear Tooth ask more to herself than to me. "I meanâ€¦ I get that we were at a dentist's office, butâ€¦"

Remembering what Jack had told me earlier, I point at her necklace, the one Jack had mentioned held a tiny tooth on it. Looking at me a bit confused, her hand moves up and touches it.

"Myâ€¦ my necklace?"

"There's a tooth on it," I point out the obvious.

Tooth lifts the charm from her collarbone, a laugh coming from her grin as she looks back down at the tooth between her fingers.

"Of course. I should've thought of thatâ€¦"

"Should've thought of what?" Jack ask as he approaches us, his bike by his side.

"Thanks again for all your help, uhâ€¦ Tooth," I go, making it to where neither of us have to answer Jack's question, just to steer clear of any potential awkwardness." I was, uhâ€¦ not gonna lie, but I definitely wasn't prepared for he to take a spill like that. So thanks for being here to, y'knowâ€¦ help out and stuff."

"Yeah, well, you two need to be more careful," Tooth lectures us, though she still has that toothy grin on from before. "Luckily Jack here was wearing the proper gear, so that helped him more than anything."

I nudge him in the arm, and he rolls his blue eyes.

"I'll be more careful, don't worry," he tells her. "Thanks though, Tooth."

By the look on her face, I can tell Tooth's in that awkward position where you can tell she was about to turn and leave, but then thought of something else to say, but is still contemplating on whether or not she wants to say it. Before I can ask her what's wrong, she simply says, "Ana."

"Hm?" Jack and I both go on cue.

"My name'sâ€¦ my name's Ana. Ana Farry."

I raise my eyebrows, surprised to hear that I actually have heard that name before somewhere at school. I think this girl was the valedictorian last year for the sophomore class or something, except, on the announcements, they introduced her as \_Tati\_ana Farry, not just Ana.

"I like Tooth more," I hear Jack say next to me with a shrug. "Suits you better, I think."

Tooth opens her mouth, but closes it before any words can come out. I probably would've had the same reaction if someone had said something like that to me, but by the way Tooth is smiling at Jack and nodding her head, I can't quite say that she disagrees with him.

"Yeah, wellâ€¦ see ya, boys," she says, reopening the driver's door of her car and flicking her hand in our directions. "Say outta trouble now, you hear?"

Jack replies first. "Can't make any promises."

Tooth gives him a knowing look, followed with an eye roll and a shake of the head. As I hear her put her car into gear and drive off down the road, I make my way over to where I had dropped my bike, hoping I hadn't done too much damage when I jumped off of it earlier. I pick up the bike, dusting off the seat, as Jack walks up to my side, his bike still in hand.

"You're turning into a real sass master," I tell him. "Talking to a girl you barely know like that."

"Well, you know," he says back, smiling. "I \_am\_ learning from the best."

## 7. Thank You For Being Here

**\*\*Ugh. This chapter just didn't want to get written.\*\***

I do have some bad news. I'm not going to be able to update for a good two weeks, since I'm going out to a cabin in the middle of nowhere with no wifi connection. So... no updates. I will be writing out the next chapter and planning out future chapters while I'm away though, so expect an update around the tenth of August.

Thank you all so much for reading this and for sending in your reviews! I totally eat up every compliment and criticism I get, so they're very much appreciated!

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The rest of Hiccup's and my routine bike practices go along a lot more smoothly compared to our first. Although I still somehow manage to find myself being thrown to the ground on a regular basis, it's not quite as frequent as before, and I'm glad to say that I actually have improved quite a bit. I have the whole balancing thing down, and picking up speed and making sharp turns is coming more naturally to me now.

Though I feel a lot more confident with my biking than a week ago, Hiccup stays realistic about the upcoming race against who I discover is actually his loathed cousin. I'd like to think I stand a chance against this Lout guy - he's definitely heavier than me, so wouldn't that mean I'd have a speed advantage of some sort? - but Hiccup is quite frank when he says there's no chance of me crossing the finish line before him.

"I meanâ€¦ you'll definitely finish the race, Jack," he tacks on when he sees my dejected reaction to this news. "Not before him, no, but you'llâ€¦ y'know. You'll finish. Which is a huuuuge improvement, I think, with where you were when we started, right?"

Even though it's somewhat of a downer to admit that I won't be winning this race, I guess losing to Lout won't be the absolute end of the world. Hiccup claims that Lout didn't accept his challenge to race me because he's out to get revenge for me messing up his paint job, but because he just wants a reason to be the center of attention. Since Hiccup has known this boy for what he tells me is his entire life, I don't see a reason to not trust his words.

At least, out of this experience, I've not only learned how to ride a bike - which seems to be a need-to-know skill in this small town - but I've also grown closer to Hiccup. No, I won't say we're best friends or anything like that, but things definitely have changed between us compared to when we had first met. When he talks to me now, he mostly succeeds in making eye contact, when he used to only be able to look at anything besides me it seemed. Not only has he improved with locking eyes, but our conversations have moved from being somewhat strained and awkward to, wellâ€¦ indigenous feeling.

He laughs and smiles a lot more than he used to, and his sassy and sarcastic remarks are still intact with his odd sense of humor, which I've learned to play along with.

Despite the fact that we've both gotten to this comfortable place in our relationship though, we still haven't moved much in the department that has to do with personally knowing each other. I've tried every so often to bring up something deeper than riding bikes - like his home life or other friendships he has - but Hiccup always just shrugs me off, instantly switching the topic back to how leaning forward slightly will increase my speed. I eventually stop pestering him about it when I find that not only am I not making any advances in my strategy, but he isn't making any attempts to actually get to know me either. I suppose, when he wants to tell me about those things, he will. Until thenâ€¦ well, I guess I should just enjoy his company.

We stick to just riding everywhere we can go, practicing on different surfaces with different obstacles; anything that'll better prepare me for what I'm going to face this upcoming Saturday. What started out as just me riding up and down the main street of the outskirts of town eventually leads to the two of us venturing off into the middle of town, where the roads are paved and smooth. That surface change in itself ends up being somewhat of a challenge for me, since I've grown accustomed to roads that are bumpy and jagged, but I get over it quickly, which impresses Hiccup more than he'll admit, I can tell.

During our first days with riding in town, some kids around our age would spit words of hate at us, saying that I don't stand a chance against Lout, apparently the long-standing king of bike racing. After a couple of days of taking Hiccup's advice though and ignoring them, the constant mockery fades away until the kids don't even bat an eyelash at us coming down the street anymore.

"Why do they do that?" I ask as we reach the familiar dirt road leading back to my house. It's only two days before the race, and I can slowly feel this thing Emma told me is called nervousness creeping into my chest. "I mean, we all \_know\_ I'm not going to win. Why are they rubbing it in?"

Hiccup lets out a sigh from beside me as we continue to pedal. "Some people justâ€¦" He trails off, allowing only the sounds of our bikes to remain.

"Justâ€¦ what?" I ask.

"Justâ€¦ mean. Some people are just \_mean\_."

There's something about how he says the last word, the emphasis that leads me to believe that this boy understands something that I still haven't quite grasped yet. I say, "You sound like you're used to this kind of treatment from them. Are you?" and he answers without even skipping a single beat.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Taken aback by how quickly he answered and even by his cold tone, I look away and down at my feet, still pedaling. "Ohâ€¦ o-okayâ€¦"

After biking in silence for only a moment or two, Hiccup begins to review me on everything I learned that day, a regular thing we do as our practices draw to an end. As he's asking me what one would have to do in order to make an effective and quick U-turn, I notice something out of the corner of my eye positioned on the side of the road. Hiccup continues on as I turn my head to see two children, one a boy with short, dark brown hair, and the other a girl with a nest of blonde on her head, standing behind what I think is a box turned upside down. There's a pitcher and a dozen or so paper cups sitting on top of the box in front of them, a small sign with LEMONADE 4 SALE - 50¢ scribbled on it almost illegibly in red.

"What's that?" I ask, breaking into Hiccup's question.

He looks over to where I'm referring, giving off a vibe of being a little frustrated with me for not paying attention to his review, but also confused on what I'm talking about. When he sees the children though, who are now waving towards us with large smiles on their faces, he lightens up.

"That's a lemonade stand, duh," he tells me. "Didn't you ever run a lemonade stand when you were a kid? It was, like, a simple way of gettin' some cash back then, even though who really needed money at that age, right?"

I shake my head. "I've never heard of it before."

Hiccup gives me that weird look he always gives me when I say I don't know something that I suppose every normal person would know. Even after having to receive this look for the last week on several occasions, I still don't know how to react to it. I haven't been able to find the right time to tell him why I don't know all these things, but then again, maybe I shouldn't. My parents - especially my mother - have stressed to me often that some people just won't understand and may even take advantage of my situation, which is the last thing I want.

After receiving this look so many times from Hiccup, the urge to just tell him is becoming difficult to fight though. Not only do I want to tell him so he'll stop looking at me funny, but because I honestly just want him to know.

"What planet are you even from?" I hear Hiccup say. By the way he's wearing that smirk on his freckled face, his gapped front teeth showing, I can tell he's just messing with me now.

I decide to play along, like usual. "Ah, well, seeing as you've caught me, I guess I have no choice but to tell you the truth of who I really am. Hiccup, I'm an alien."

"You don't say?"

"I know it may be somewhat of a shock to you, but"

"Oh no, trust me. It's not."

"Well, that's good. So, how do you feel about me harvesting your brains for research?"

"Uhâ€¦ a littleâ€¦"

"Scared?"

"To say the least."

"Good, good. I'll need to record that in my space journal when I get home. Human reactions to life threatening situations are very important data to log you know."

"I'm sorry, but do I even know you?"

"No, I don't believe you really do."

"Yeah, uhâ€¦ let's go get some lemonade."

We bike our ways up to the lemonade stand, Hiccup fishing in his back pocket for his wallet as he explains to me briefly how a lemonade stand works. Both the children seem to be rather excited to see us, but the boy, who's the eldest of the two, tries to hide it - unlike the younger girl, who's probably only four and now jumping around the stand laughing, her messy blonde hair flying all around her.

"Two lemonades, please, young sir," Hiccup says as we come to a stop in front of the stand, him pulling a dollar out to hand to the young boy. I'm about to protest about him paying for me, but he manages to wave me off before I can even get a word out.

"Wow. Only a dollar for two lemonades," I say, smiling down at the boy and girl as I lean on my handlebars. "That's a pretty good deal you've got going here."

"Thanks!" the boy says, a large smile showing off a missing front tooth appearing on his face. "We wanted to make it cheaper than the stuff they sell at The Ring, right, Sophie? Uhâ€¦ \_Sophie\_?" At not hearing a reply, the boy looks around frantically, his brown eyes growing large with fear. "Ah man, Soph! If I lose her again, Mom'll \_kill\_ me!"

"Don't worry, don't worry," I hear Hiccup laugh as I look down and see the little girl sitting by his foot closest to the stand, poking the toes of his shoe. "She's right here, safe and sound, aren't ya?" The girl named Sophie looks up at him with the biggest green eyes I've ever seen before, and lets out a laugh, along with a "Jamie, Jamie! Robot! Beep boop boop!"

"Soph, what are you talkingâ€¦" the boy supposedly named Jamie starts, leaning over the stand to see who I assume is his little sister, nearly knocking over the pitcher of lemonade in the process. As soon as he stands and looks down at the little girl though, his eyes grow twice their original size. "WOAH!" he exclaims, a large grin peeling across his face. "Are you some kind of \_robot\_ or something?"

In all honestly, I'm a little confused by this statement, mainly because I can't tell if he's talking to me or Hiccup anymore. By the way I hear Hiccup chuckle though, Sophie continuing to sing, "Robot, robot, roooooobot! Beep beep beep boop!" I can tell the question was directed towards him.

"Yeah, uhâ€¦ I guess I kinda am, aren't I?" Hiccup say, reaching up and scratching the back of his neck. "More \_part\_ robot than anything, buuuutâ€¦ eigh, close enough."

I look over at Hiccup strangely, wondering what he's talking about, as Jamie pours our lemonades and continues to obsess over the fact that he's apparently meeting a part robot for the first time. When I look down at Hiccup's freckle covered legs resting on either side of his stationary bike, since I hear Sophie saying some illegible gibberish down there at his foot, that's when the pieces begin to fall into place.

His prosthetic leg. That's made out of \_metal\_.

I had noticed the odd limb upon meeting him last week, sure, but I never thought of pointing it out, because, even after two weeks of being out of the hospital, I already had an understanding that there are just certain things you don't bring up with people. And a lost limb just struck me as one of those touchy topics, also considering the fact that I don't know exactly how he lost it.

That doesn't mean curiosity wasn't taking over the best of me however.

My train of thought is broken by Hiccup passing me a paper cup filled to the brim with lemonade over his handlebars, the ice inside of it so cold I can feel it on my fingertips. I start listening to the conversation unraveling in front of me again, letting Hiccup's prosthetic leave my mind. Jamie tells us that one of his favorite characters in this televisions show he and Sophie watches every day has one leg and that he beats people up with it sometimes, which makes me laugh.

"Do \_you\_ beat people up with your leg?" Jamie asks as he stuffs the dollar Hiccup had given him into a piggy bank.

"All the time," I answer before Hiccup can. "If you look closely at the local kids around here, you'll notice that they have a bunch of bruises on their calves." I twist my leg around, revealing a smaller blue and purple bruise near my shin that I gained after falling off my bike and having the pedal smack up against it rather hard. "See that right there? That's a \_perfect\_ example of what that leg of his can do."

Jamie looks down at my naked shin wide eyed, as Sophie crawls over towards me and pokes it, giggling like crazy.

"It's not good to lie to children, Jack," Hiccup tells me, taking a sip from his lemonade. "You're poisoning their young minds."

"I'm just warning them of your brutality. No harm in that."

"Yeah, except when it's a \_lie\_."

"I don't know \_where\_ you're getting this whole me lying thing from, but I can assure you that that itself is a lie."

"Yeah, you just keep telling yourself that."

"You guys are funny," Jamie pipes in with a giggle. He then turns and

addresses me directly, looking rather curious. "Why do you have white hair?"

"He's an alien," Hiccup says before I can, and I can't help but smile at the reference from earlier. "Part of a rare race that has hair that changes color depending on their intelligence level. They're endangered you know."

"Wow," Jamie goes, him and his little sister both now staring wide eyed up at my hair. "An \_alien\_? Really?"

I'm about to dismiss this and say Hiccup's only joking with them, but he continues to milk it without giving me a chance to stop him. "Oh yeah. The darker the hair, their smarter they are. The lighter it isâ€¦ wellâ€¦"

"IIIIIIII think we should go," I interrupt before he can finish his sentence. The siblings let out a collective "awwwww" as Hiccup smirks my way and mounts himself back on to the seat of his bike, his lemonade still in hand. Looking back down at Jamie, avoiding Hiccup's smug look, I say, "It was nice meeting you kids. Thanks for the lemonade!"

"No, thank \_you\_ for buying it!" Jamie says back with a grin. I hear little Sophie sing, "Bye bye, robot and alien!" as we pedal off, and I have a hard time not smiling from ear to ear.

We move further down the road towards my house, only maybe half a mile away from where Jamie and Sophie had had their lemonade stand set up. Hiccup takes periodic sips from his cup, gripping on to the handlebar with one hand as he does so. My eyes trail down to his prosthetic leg when he isn't watching, and my mind is instantly bursting with questions that I really want to be answered: How did he get it? When did it happen? Is it hard, only having one real leg?

Once we approach my house and the sun finally gets the best of us, we pull to the side of the road and park ourselves under a nearby tree. I'm finally able to take a sip of my lemonade as I hear Hiccup next to me say, "Cute kids, huh?"

I nod, taking in the sourness of the drink.

"I think they're your neighbors," he tells me, stretching his legs out in front of him and letting out a yawn. "The Bennett's or something?"

I nod again, this time more absent-mindedly. I think my parents mentioned something about our neighbors being named the Bennett's, but I'm concentrating too hard on the metal that is Hiccup's leg to really dwell on it too hard.

"Yeah, I think I babysat for Jamie when he was a baby," Hiccup goes on. "He was probably the soundest sleeper I ever had to deal with during my short-lived babysitting career in middle-"

"How'dyouloseyourleg?"

The words come out faster than I can ever think them in my head,



which leads to them sounding a little like Sophie's gibberish from earlier. The worst part, however, is the fact that Hiccup actually understood them, which means he's now staring at me with this stunned expression that's making me regret my question more than anything, and I don't know what to say, because he's looking at me, and I can feel him about to dismiss it like every other personal question I ask him, and then the rest of the day is going to be so embarrassing and awkward and-

"I'm sorry," I say without even thinking. "That was rude. You don't have-

"No," Hiccup goes, startling me slightly, since I hadn't been expecting him to talk back. "No. It's, uhâ€¦ it's fine." I hear him chuckle a little, placing his lemonade in the dried up grass beside him. "I was actually wondering when you'd ask me about it, not gonna lie. Took you long enough."

"Ohâ€¦ wellâ€¦ I would've asked sooner if I knew you wanted me to."

When I see him let out this tiny smile - and yes! It's one of his genuine ones - I know that this conversation that I was so frightened of having only seconds ago is going to go a lot smoother than I anticipated.

"It was a bike accident," he tells me simply. "Back when I was, uhâ€¦ thirteen, I think? Dang, now that I think about it, that was only two summer ago. Wowâ€¦ feels like a lot longer than that. Ha... anywaysâ€¦ uhâ€¦ I don't remember who I was racing, but I think it was either Lout or one of the twins or someone, but that doesn't really matter, not really. Butâ€¦ something happened? With my bike, I mean. I don't think I checked it before riding that day, which was the stupidest mistake anyone could make. But I think my chain popped or something, and I lost control of the bike, and, wellâ€¦ I don't quite remember how it happened exactly, since I passed out really soon afterwards, but I think my bike crushed my leg up against a wall or something like that, and completely destroyed it. The only thing they could do after was to justâ€¦ y'knowâ€¦ cut it off. So they did, and now-" He leans forward, knocking his fist against the metal steam that is now his leg. "-I have this beautiful contraption attached to me forever and always, 'til death do us part."

And, with hearing this story, suddenly all the pieces fall perfectly into place. Fish had told me just a week ago about an accident that Hiccup was in involving a bike. Of course that accident was the one that resulted in him losing a leg. I mean, there's nothing else physically wrong with this guy, so that had to be it. Wow, how could I be so stupid as to not see the connections?

"Not much of a cool story, I know," Hiccup goes on when I don't say anything right away. "I was thinking, y'know, after it happened, of making up some awesome horror story that would totally impress all the girls and stuffâ€¦ but there were people that saw what really happened, and Lout would definitely call me out on it, so that idea was shot down pretty quick."

"But you still bike?" I ask, looking up at him. "I mean, even after it took your leg?"

Hiccup just shrugs, suddenly not being able to keep his eyes on me anymore. "Wellâ€¦ yeah. I mean, sure, I lost my leg because of it, butâ€¦ whatever. I just make sure that my bike is always in tip-top shape before getting on it, so I don't lose the other one."

"Is it hard though? Biking with it?"

Another shrug, still no eyes contact. "Kinda. I meanâ€¦ at first it was. But walking and doing pretty much anything involving my legs was hard, so it wasn't like biking was any different."

"But you're used to it now?"

"Well, yeah. I meanâ€¦ I don't really think I had any other choice, now did I?"

Slowly shaking my head and leaning back against the tree behind me, I allow myself to take in what I've just learned. I feel like, with him telling me this, a door has been opened between us. Actually, now that I think about it, it's more like a door's been cracked open, only slightly, since there is still so much I want to ask this boy. I, however, restrain myself from letting my mouth run, since I'm thankful for just getting this piece of insightful information.

Hiccup gets up then, dusting off the grass from his shorts. "Wanna go get some shakes at The Ring or something?" he asks me, cocking his head in the direction of town. "You did really well today, so I figured you earned it. And because it's just too damned hot out here." \_

"Under one condition," I say as he pulls up his bike.

"And that condition iiiiisâ€¦ what exactly?"

I smirk, getting up from under the tree. "That you tell me your real name."

Hiccup stares at me for a moment, a deadpan look on his face, and then he lets out a loud "HA!", catching me completely off guard. When I ask him what's so funny, he simply says, "Dude! I've been goin' by Hiccup for so long, I don't even remember what my real name is anymore!"

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As the two of us sit at Fish's and my usual table at The Ring, waiting for Astrid to come take our orders, I can tell that Jack wants to probably continue asking me questions. Now don't get me wrong. I like Jack, I really do. He's definitely not someone I pictured myself becoming close with, no, but you know what? What happens happens and I'm not going to argue with it.

This whole him asking me questions about my life outside of our daily practices thing though? Yeah, I'd rather not.

Instead, I get him talking about the upcoming school year to keep him distracted, despite the fact that this is the last thing I really want to talk about. The first month of summer vacation has been nearly used up and I hadn't even realized it. That's just awesome.

Jack tells me he's seventeen, so I assume that means he's going to be a mighty senior this year. He doesn't seem very arrogant about it though, which is odd, since most incoming seniors this year are really big-headed about their sudden "authority".

"What grade are you going to be in?" he asks once I finish explaining to him the system that is our high school hierarchy system.

"Stupid sophomore," I tell him, rolling my eyes.

"What's so bad about being a sophomore?"

"Honestly? Not much. I'm just tired of being an underclassman, that's all."

"An under-what-man?"

I feel like I should be used to this - him asking me what simple things are - but, in all honesty, I'm not. Ever since he asked me what a predicament was when we first met, it's just been one of those things that justâ€¦ I don't know. It's weird. I try to not point it out though, since it may be some touchy mental disorder that might offend him if I were to speak up about it, but that doesn't mean I'm not curious.

"An underclassman is someone that's, like, in their lower two grades, y'know?" I explain, giving in to his ignorance like I usually do. "An underclassmen is someone who's a freshman or sophomore - like me and Fish - and an upperclassman is someone who's a junior or senior - like you and Tooth."

That familiar name quickly catches his attention, his eyes seeming to have a little sparkle in them at hearing it. "Tooth's an upperclassman?"

I can't help but let out a chuckle at his reaction to her name, but decide not to say a word about it, for his sake. "Yeah. Last I heard, she's gonna be a junior this year."

"Ohâ€¦ I didn't know that."

Astrid glides up to us then, her blonde bangs clipped back out of her eyes and her long braid thrown over her bare shoulder. Seeming a little stunned as she pulls up to our table, I guess because she's never seen someone other than Fish accompanying me here before, she turns towards me and asks, "Who's this?"

"I'm Jack!" Jack introduces himself before I can. Astrid raises an eyebrow at his enthusiasm.

"He just moved into town at the beginning of the summer," I explain further for her. "Jack, this is Astrid. She's a, uhâ€¦ a friend."

"Yeah. Something like that," Astrid says under her breath, and I stick my tongue out at her. "What can I get you two on this awfully humid day then?"

"Two shakes," I say. "One straight-up chocolate aaaaandâ€¦!"

Jack says his order right on cue. "One vanilla with rainbow sprinkles!"

Astrid jots something down on her little notepad, barely lifting her pen as she goes, then looks up at Jack, narrow her eyes at him. "I think I've seen you before. Or at least heard of you. Aren't you that kid that messed up Lout's bike a week ago or whatever? The one that challenged him to race this weekend?"

"How do you know about that?" Jack asks, seeming genuinely surprised.

"It's a little thing called the Wildfire Effect," I explain to Jack as Astrid rolls her eyes, taking a seat across the table from the both of us. "It occurs mostly in little towns like Berk here."

"The Wildfire Effect?"

"It means that it spread like wildfire," Astrid explains for him. "I mean, everyone in town knows about it now. It's kinda a super big deal, since no one's ever challenged Lout to a race before. Say, are you any good at biking? 'Cause you're gonna need to be really good if you plan on beatin' Lout."

Jack shrugs in response. "I'm alright. Hiccup's been teaching me a lot of stuff though, so I think I'll be fine. I don't plan on winning. Just crossing the finish line."

Astrid's stare goes slowly from him to me, and the look she gives me says I've apparently done something wrong. Jack can't see this though, because she shoots me this grin and politely asks, with a slight edge in her tone that's masked pretty well, "Can I talk to you for a moment, Hiccup? In private?"

I know there's not physical way out of this, so I nod and we both get up, leaving Jack alone at the table. I follow her a few yards away, I suppose making sure Jack isn't in hearing range. Right before we're about to round the corner of the kitchen, she cuts sharply in front of me, her braid nearly whipping me in the face.

"Okay, what'd I do?" I ask, and she narrows her eyes.

"Are you telling me that that boy isn't going to try and win against Lout this weekend? Because I feel like that completely defeats the purpose of him racin' him to begin with."

"Yes, that's initially the plan," I tell her. "I mean, he just learned how to bike, Astrid. He isn't the most advan-

"WHAT!?"

Ah, man. Probably should've left that part outâ€¦!

"Yeah," I go on, scratching the back of my neck, looking anywhere \_but\_ at the girl that could potentially beat me to a bloody pulp if she wanted to in front of me. "He didn't know how to ride a bike when I met him, sooooo I've been, uhâ€¦ I've been teaching him. And stuff. He's actually gotten really good."

I look up, and Astrid doesn't look quite as upset as she does utterly shocked. I don't know if this is a good or bad thing.

"You're gonna get him \_killed\_, Hiccup," she breaths. "He's gonna \_die\_ racing against Lout."

"Oh, stop it," I say, rolling my eyes at her. "Listen, I've been teaching him the basics, and even some tricks as well, so I think-

"Noooo, I don't think you understand what you're up against here. Loutâ€¦ dear Godsâ€¦ Lout bikes \_dirty\_, alright? He doesn't care if the person he's biking against is advanced or not. He's gonna do whatever he can to win. That. Race."

"Aaaaaand I've been teaching Jack how to bike dirty too! We practice on dirt roads and rocky terrain and stuff, and I push him around when we go against each other! He's got a good sense of balance and he's super quick. Really, he is, Astrid. No, I don't believe he's gonna be able to win, but he'll definitely get out of the race \_alive\_."

Astrid's shaking her head, like she's trying to shake my words away, which honestly kind of bugs me. Why can't she accept the fact that, no, Jack's not going to win against Lout - like I know she wants him to - but hey, it's not like he's going to get completely massacred either.

"That's not enough, Hiccup," she hisses at me, looking quickly around to see if any of her co-workers are watching in our argument. "Whatever you've taught him, it isn't enough. He's gonna get hurt. Like, really bad."

"Oh please. Have some faith in me, will ya."

"How can I have faith in your when you're basically preparing him for slaughter?"

"I'm not going to let him get \_killed\_. Geez, Astrid."

"And why in Thor's name should I believe that load of crap?"

"Because he's my \_friend\_, that's why."

Astrid opens her mouth, appearing to be armed with a comeback, but nothing comes out from between her lips. She holds my stare, her blue eyes meeting mine, and I hold it for as long as I can, wanting her to see the weight in my words. Closing her mouth, she takes a step away from me, allowing her shoulders, hunched for an attack, to relax.

"Listen," I continue when she's clearly given me the floor to speak again. "He's not gonna get hurt, you hear me? He's a good biker and

I've taught him everything I know. There is no way on this green earth that he's going to even get a scrap on his knee\_, alright? He's going to be fine."

"I really hope you're right, Haddock."

"And I am. Justâ€¦ be there this Saturday. Watch him race, and you'll see what I mean."

Astrid shakes her head, looking over at where Jack is still sitting, who seems too occupied with the sugar packet in his hands to have heard us.

"If he gets hurt-"

"He won't."

"If he does," Astrid goes on, walking past me and towards the ordering station, ignoring my protest, "I'm blaming you and you alone." Before I can say anything back, she's off, gliding through tables and chairs, away from me and my anger.

I stalk my way back to our table and, as I sit down, Jack surprises me by asking, "So what was all that about?" I had assumed he hadn't heard - or at least seen - a thing between Astrid and me, since he had looked so preoccupied, but I suppose I was wrong.

"Sheâ€¦ doesn't think my teaching methods when it comes to biking are good," I only halfway lie. The last thing I want to tell him right now is that she thinks he's going to get killed this weekend. Yeah, that's a good way to boost his confidence.

"Well, that's stupid," Jack says bluntly, tossing the sugar packet back with the others. "Is she really your friend? I mean, she didn't seem to really like you that much."

"Honestly?" I ask, and he nods his head at me. "She's kinda the girl I've been in love with since I was eight-years-old. But she's also one of the main girls that absolutely hates my guts."

Jack's eyebrows raise at this. "That'sâ€¦ rough."

"You bet it is. Can we talk about something else?"

"Sure, uhâ€¦ actuallyâ€¦ there was something I wanted to talk to you about."

Shoot, I should've given him the opportunity to pick the topic for a conversation without even realizing it. Knowing him, he's going to ask me about my family life or my friendships and just, bleh. Those are the last things I want to have to talk about right-

"I wanted to come clean with why I ask so many, umâ€¦ obvious questions."

Oh? Now this might be interesting. I show he's got my attention by leaning back in my chair, crossing my arms across my chest. He licks his lips, showing that he's nervous, and I begin to wonder what type of information he's about to tell me.

"Wellâ€¦ this is going to sound kind of weird, butâ€¦ I, uhâ€¦"  
Taking a deep breath, he claps his hands together and says, "I was in a coma."

Say \_what\_ now?

"It was likeâ€¦ there was an accident. You know, kind of like what happened to you," he goes on when I don't say anything. "And I hit my head. \_Really\_ hard. I don't know how or on what or when it happened, but I guess I nearly died or something because of the impact? I don't know, but I lost, likeâ€¦ \_all\_ my memory. Like, I woke up and didn't know who I was or where I was or what had happened to me. I couldn't even remember how to \_speak\_."

"Woah," I breathe out without meaning to.

"Yeah, I know. Like, I could form the words in my head, but I couldn't get them out. And I looked at my hand and was just thought, 'What \_is\_ this?', you know."

"Wait, wait, wait" I stop him before he can go on. "You're telling \_me\_ that you didn't even know what your \_hand\_ was?" What the hell does that even mean? I mean, I've heard of people losing their memories after getting in some accident involving their head, but not being able to remember simply body parts or words? There's got to be something more to this kid's story that he's not telling me, because that just doesn't make any sense.

"No. I looked at my hand was justâ€¦ I was in shock, to tell you the truth," he explains, holding up his hand and looking down at it, like he was remembering the memory. "It was so weird. But that's what I did for the first week out of the hospital. Emma - my little sister - she would teach me words and their meanings, and we would play games to get me thinking again. And as soon as I heard a word, I would instantly remember what it was and what it meant. It was justâ€¦ it was just weird."

"Tell me about it," I laugh. "Dang. That'sâ€¦ wow."

"Yeah. Butâ€¦ yeah. I really wanted to tell you, because, wellâ€¦ you give me these looks. Like, when I don't know what something is. And I felt like, if I told you my situation, you won't do that anymore. You'dâ€¦ you knowâ€¦ understand."

I'm suddenly at a loss for words as he stares down at his lap, looking a little embarrassed to be admitting this to me, when, really, I should be the one that feels embarrassed - which I totally do, oh Gods. I hadn't even realized that \_that\_ was the reason why this kid didn't get what a lemonade stand was. I thought he was just slow or something, not suffering from freaking \_memory\_ \_loss\_.

"Wow, man," I somehow manage to say. "Iâ€¦ I'm sorry. I mean, about being so, uhâ€¦ so obvious with that. If I had knownâ€¦"

"I know. And it's okay," Jack says, smiling up at me. "That's why I decided to tell you."

"Why'd you wait so long though?"

"Iâ€¦ I needed to build up enough courage to actually tell you."

I nod, letting his simple words sink in. Man. To tell someone something like this - that you were in a coma for x-amount of days and woke up not even knowing who you were. Not going to lie, but I understand how that must take some balls.

"Do youâ€¦ know what happened to you? Like, for you to hit your head so hard?"

Jack shakes his head. "No. Not a clue."

"Have you thought of maybe asking your parents about it?"

"They don't know what happened either. They weren't there."

"Ahâ€¦ wellâ€¦ that's a bummer."

Jack shrugs, leaning back in his chair more comfortably. "It's not the worse. I mean, it'd be nice to know exactly what happened, but no one else was around, soâ€¦ no luck there."

"I guess it's for the better," I tell him. When he gives me a quizzical look, I continue. "Likeâ€¦ maybe if you knew what happened, it would change how you act now. I mean, I don't know if you were someone totally different in your, uhâ€¦ 'past life', so to speak, but I think it's good to move on from stuff like that. You're a new person now. You should take advantage of that."

Geez. What in the world am I even saying? Here I am, telling him to move on from past events, act like they never played any important role in his life, when I can't even do it myself. Seven years later, and I still can't help but look at that picture on my nightstand, wondering how things would've been so much different if I hadn't-

"I suppose you're right," Jack says, interrupting my thoughts, which I'm thankful for. The last thing I need to be thinking about right now is my mom.

As Jack is telling me about one of his first days out of the hospital when he went exploring in his backyard with his little sister, Astrid glides up to our table and plops two shakes down in front of us without saying a word. She's flipped her tray in her hand and is about to glide off when I notice that, instead of having a chocolate shake, I have a strawberry. I'm about to announce this to her, but she's already zoomed off before I can.

"Didn't you order a chocolate shake?" Jack points out, taking a quick sip from his own.

"Yeeeeeah, but I have a feeling she mixed them up on purpose," I tell him with a smile. "The jokes on her though. I actually secretly wanted strawberry."

Jack rolls his eyes. "Sure you did."

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I'm standing in the middle of the woods, my bike beside me as I feel the gentle breeze brush against my cheeks and nose. Nothing around me looks familiar, but at the same time, it does. I know this feeling should bother me, but it don't let it. I look up and trees on top of trees form a canopy over me, the sun only barely able to peek through the quivering leaves. Tangled ribbons of roots emerge from the dirt ground around my feet, wrapping around each other like they're all attempting to strangle the other.

I feel at peace here. I don't know why, but I do.

"Hey! Jack!"

I turn to see Hiccup, sitting amply on his bike's seat, waving me over, his auburn hair looking more red than brown because of the odd sunlight here. Without hesitation, I jump on my bike and start pedaling towards him. I feel like I should be having a hard time as I move, with all these roots in my way, but I glide across the ground as if they're not even there. Hiccup gets on his bike as I move towards him, and he starts pedaling away from me, a toothy grin showing off the gap between his front teeth on his face.

"Wait up, Hic!" I yell, twisting my handlebars every which way in order to avoid the trees surrounding me. "You're going too fast! I can't keep up!"

"You're gonna have to try harder than that if you wanna keep up then!" he yells back at me. Despite that I can see him through the trunks, his hair standing out like a sore thumb, his voice sounds like he's miles off, giving off a feeling of an echo. I don't like the feeling this gives me, so I pedal faster, desperately hoping to catch up with him.

This goes on for what feels like hours, the two of us riding through the woods together, trees and bushes, animals and rocks zooming past us as we go. Half of me feels irritated, because I want to catch up with Hiccup, but the other half feels serene. The landscape passing me by is so beautiful, even if I'm not able to really dwell on any of it like I want to.

All of the sudden I feel this pang in the back of my head. Reaching up and touching my hair, I almost lose control of the bike and crash into a tree, but I'm somehow able to catch myself.

"You alright back there?" I hear Hiccup's distance voice ask. I look around, trying to find his familiar form, but I can't through all the nature.

"Where are you?" I yell back at him.

"Behind you."

I look back and there he is, giving me that same grin from before as he tails my back wheel.

"Wanna race?" he asks, and I nod, not finding anything weird with the fact that he somehow moved from miles and miles ahead of me to suddenly behind me. "There's a river up there," he tells me, lining

up his front tire with mine as we continue to glide through the trees. "First one there has to buy the shakes next time we go to The Ring, got it?"

I nod. "Got it."

Hiccup counts down, and at three, we both bolt forward, leaning against our handlebars to move faster than the other. To my surprise, I'm winning, somehow managing to have a good couple of feet on him. I can hear him laughing behind me, which gets me laughing to.

After what feels like only a minute, I come into a clearing, the sun almost blinding me as I pull to a stop. Placing my hand above my eyes to block the sun out, I see that I've stopped on a surface made completely of rock, small wedges looking like miniature rivers carved through them by water. Suddenly I feel something moving around my ankles, and I look down at my feet to see that, yes, I'm standing in what appears to be a river, only the water is just about an inch high. I look around, letting this fresh air and sound of water lapping against the rocks sink into my skin. The stream appears to go on forever it seems.

"This is amazing," I whisper mainly to myself, but then I remember that Hiccup's here too, probably enjoying the scenery just as I am. "Isn't this amazing, Hic?" I ask him, turning to face the break in the trees that we both entered from. Instead of coming face to face with Hiccup though, like I had expected, my eyes meet with a dark, shadowy figure, standing where Hiccup should be standing. There's no face on the form, no resemblance to a human at all besides two arms sprouting out of its sides.

"W-who are you?" I somehow manage to say, feeling the words escaping my throat like wind. "Where's Hiccup?"

The figure doesn't say a word, but begins moving slowly towards me. As I look past it, I see, near the entrance to the woods, a familiar body speckled with brown spots, motionless green eyes staring back at me. The intense feeling in the back of my head presents itself again as I register what I'm seeing, feeling like knives are being stabbed into my scalp. I fight back a scream, but I can feel it burning in my throat as the figure moves closer to me, raising one of its hands out towards me, its long, clawed fingers beckoning me towards it.

I'm about to yell at it to stay back when my vision goes black only for a moment. Then, suddenly, I'm underwater, all sounds around me cancelled out. In the distance - above the water it seems - I hear a scream; one long, shrill scream that makes the back of my head feel like it's being torn in two.

I open my eyes, dismissing the darkness around me, and I'm lying in my bed, panting harder than I've ever panted before.

"Jack?"

My neck snaps in the direction of the voice, and I see Emma, dressed in her purple nightgown, standing beside me in my bed, her long, brown hair sticking out on its own in some places. Her eyes are large and wide awake as she stares down at me, like she just witnessed me doing something she never wanted to see.

"Wâ€| wha's goin' on," I slur out, pressing my hands against my eyelids to stop the stinging. "Why areâ€| where isâ€|"

"Shhh, Jack. It's okay, it's okay," Emma soothes me, taking a seat on the bed beside me and pulling her small fingers through my hair. "It was just a silly nightmare, that's all. You're okay now."

"Aâ€| a what?" I ask, looking up at her through the darkness.

"A nightmare," she explains. "It'sâ€| it's like a dream. Onlyâ€| only it's bad."

I nod my head up at her, the word suddenly registering in my mind. "Yeah. Yeah, that's what it was. It wasâ€| it was a nightmare."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Without my knowledge, my head shakes on its own, and I decide that not talking about it is probably for the better. The last thing I want to do right now is have to relive what I just had to experience, be it real or not.

"Do you want me to stay in here with you?" Emma asks quietly. When I nod, she removes her fingers from my hair and wiggles herself into the bed beside me, scooting me over so she can fit. I move, pulling the covers around her small body.

"Will I have another nightmare if I go back to sleep?" I ask her once she's all settled in.

Her tiny shoulders move under my blanket. "Maybe. Maybe not. You may have another, but you could also have a good dream. Are you sure you don't want to talk about it, Jack? Sometimes talking about it helps them go away."

I contemplate this notion for a moment, but I decide to shake my head again at her request. "Not tonight," I tell her through a small yawn. "I justâ€| I don't want to think about it."

Emma nods in understanding, and snuggles in close to me, curling her legs up close to mine beside her. As I feel her finger at my loose shirt, I wrap my arms around her small form, pulling her into me, and close my eyes.

"Thank you for being here," I whisper into her hair.

"Anything for you, Jack," I hear her whisper into my chest without missing a beat. I make sure she can feel my smile through her hair, so she can know how much those sweet words mean to me.

As Emma and I eventually doze off in each other's arms, I fall back into a deep sleep. Only, this time I don't have a nightmare, nor do I have a dream. Instead, all I see is darkness around me, but it's not the bad kind of darkness; it's the comforting kind.

## 8. Just Don't Die, Okay?

**\*\*Surprise! Guess who found time to update earlier than they expected?\***

Ah man, this chapter was definitely interesting to write. Not gonna say anything about it though, since I don't want to ruin it. Just... the much anticipated race finally arrives and SHIT GETS REAL.

OH, and a new character is introduced. They're from the HTTYD book series, which I hate to admit, I haven't read yet (don't worry though, I ordered them and they'll be arriving soon!). I love this certain character too much though - from what I've read and heard about them - and just couldn't help but put them in this story. So sorry if they seem a little... out of character? They might be off a bit. I dunno. Sorry if they are though.

Anyways! Thanks for all the lovely reviews and for reading and, blah blah blah, you guys already know the drill.

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On Saturday morning, I let myself sleep in, since the race isn't until noon. Toothless also decides to grace me with no morning attack, therefore allowing me to stay in bed. At around ten though, a wave of energy overcomes me as I open my eyes, and I instantly know it's time to get up.

"Big day today, bud," I tell Toothless, who's now made his way on to my chest and is peering down at me with large, green eyes.

He reaches out his small, black paw and pats me gently on the nose, letting out a soft meow.

"Tell me 'bout it."

I follow my everyday routine: get up, hobble into bathroom, shower, put on prosthetic, and dress for the day. The entire time, Toothless follows me around like a tiny, annoying shadow, close to my heels, meowing at me to get a move on. I make the motion to kick him, which causes him to stop and flinch, then playfully attack my foot when he sees I mean no harm.

My dad's watching television as I make my way down the stairs and into the kitchen, my stomach growling with a just now appearing hunger I hadn't been aware of while I was upstairs.

"Might not want to eat a big breakfast," he warns me as I open the fridge and bend down to scan my options. "Don't want to spoil your lunch, now do you?"

"That's probably a good idea," I say, closing the fridge and making a beeline for the pantry, where I know we keep the \_Pop Tarts.\_

"Speaking of lunch," I hear my dad continue, turning down the volume to the television. "I hope you don't have any plans for today, son, because I made some reservations somewhere for lunch."

I instantly stop peeling off the wrapper of my breakfast, letting his

words sink in and compute in my brain. As I turn slowly to look at him, I register that, yes, I actually\_ do\_ have plans for today. Really, really, super, extremely important plans that is.

"Do we, uhâ€¦ \_have \_to do that today?" I ask him, walking up to the counter separating the kitchen from the living room, setting my \_Pop Tart\_ down.

I can tell my dad was not expecting this type of answer from me at all; he has the same dumbfounded expression on that I was probably wearing only moments ago on hearing that he had made plans in the first place. He blinks a couple of time, clears his throat, and says, "Well, yes. I mean, we have to do it today. I made reservations andâ€¦ we're not going alone, you know."

I raise an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Bertha and her daughter and joining us. Her brother, Erik, he owns the restaurant, so we're getting a nice, little discount."

"Why Bertha?" I ask, even though I think I already know the answer.

"Wellâ€¦ she's, uhâ€¦ she's kind of my newâ€¦ new girlfriend. Yeah."

"Ahhhhhh, Daaaaaad," I go, reaching out and scratching the back of my neck. For a second there, I actually thought getting out of this lunch would be easy, but now that I know that this Bertha woman is my dad's girlfriend\_ -- when did \_that\_ even happen anyways? - I see that the odds of me sitting this one out are definitely not in my favor. "This really isn't a good time. I meanâ€¦ thisâ€¦ this \_thing\_ I have planned today. It's really, really important that I go."

"And may as I ask what this \_thing\_ is?"

"Umâ€¦ it's just a, uhâ€¦ a race."

"Aâ€¦ bike race?"

I nod. Now there's physically no way I can go, now that he knows it has to do with bikes. Great.

"Hiccup," I hear my dad go on with a sigh. "Iâ€¦ I'm sorry, but you're going to have to miss it. This is very important to us. Bertha and I have been planning this for the past week."

"Well, you could've at least \_told\_ me about it," I tell him with an edge in my tone. Despite the fact that telling me wouldn't have change anything, since the date for the race had been set in stone almost two weeks ago, it still would've been nice to have known about it in advance.

"I wanted it to be a surprise," my dad defends himself, scratching the back of his thick neck. "Her daughter's ten, so I thought you two would get along nicely too."

"Wait. She's \_ten\_? And you thought- Dad. You \_are\_ aware that I'm, like, fifteen nowâ€¦ right?"

"Of course I'm aware! How does that change anything?"

"Well, ten and fifteen are quite some distance apart from each other, aren't they? Especially when it comes to, oh, I dunno, \_ages.\_"

"Iâ€¦| guess so."

"But, Dad, I seriously need to go to this race," I change the topic to more important matters; having to deal with a ten-year-old girl isn't the biggest problem for me right now. "I mean, I promised someone I would be there for moral support, y'know? I can't let them down. We've been working really, really hard with training and I want to see that-"

"Training?" my dad interrupts me.

"Yeah," I go with a shrug, looking at the microwave sitting in the corner. I completely forgot to mention to my dad about Jack's and my little deal, but then again, I guess he never really showed any interest, did he. "I've been training this guy. You know, to bike and stuff."

"So \_that's \_where you've been every day?"

I nod. "His name's Jack Overland. He's, uhâ€¦| he's a friendâ€¦| of mineâ€¦| now."

At hearing this, I notice my dad's eyebrows rise well into his forehead. I try not to look annoyed that the idea of me having a friend is so surprising to him.

"Well, it's nice to hear you've made a new friend, son," he tells me with an approving nod, "but you're going to have to tell him that you're busy today. I'm sorry, but I can't let Bertha down like this. She's really looking forward to sitting down and getting to know you."

"But, Daaad," I start, but he swiftly stops me before I can go on.

"You're going to this lunch, Hiccup. End of discussion." He stands up, flipping off the television, and starts heading towards his bedroom, I assume to get ready for the day.

"Dad, I really, \_really-\_"

"Hiccup. No. We're done talking about this anymore."

"But, Dad. You don't-"

"Do I really have to repeat myself? The answer's no. Now eat your breakfast."

"But this is really important to me!"

"Go eat your breakfast. We'll be leaving in an hour or so."

"Can you not hear me?" I say, but he's already closed the door behind him.

I forget my breakfast sitting on the counter, since the hunger I had been feeling earlier has completely vanished. Toothless can sense that something's wrong as I enter my room, weaving between my legs and glancing up at me as I fight the urge to slam my door.

"This is a mess," I tell him, stroking his arched back. "Jack's gonna be soâ€¦ ugh. And \_Astrid.\_ Oh man, she's never going to let me hear the end of thisâ€¦ dang it." I walk over and grab my phone sitting on my nightstand, Toothless now stationed on my bed. Scrolling through my contacts until I come upon the new number I had only added a few days ago, I press the call button and peer down at Toothless, whispering, "Here we go," and he meows up at me for reassurance.

The phone only rings twice before I hear a woman's voice answer.

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is one of Jack's friends," I tell her simply, trying to get the anger and frustration that I was earlier feeling out of my voice. "I was wondering I could speak to him."

"Oh. What did you say your name was?"

"My name's Jo-"

"Thanks, Mother!" I hear a familiar voice pipe in before I can finish, making me jump a little. "I can take it from here!"

The woman, who is apparently Jack's mom, sounds a little shocked by her son's abrupt entrance into the conversation, and she even begins to say something back, like she's seriously about to start scolding him right there on the phone with me listening. Every time she starts though, Jack cuts her off, and after her last attempt fails, she silently hangs up the phone, leaving Jack and me on the line alone.

"Sorry about her," Jack goes with a nervous laugh. "She's really, uhâ€¦ well, you know."

"Have you not told your parents about me, Jack?" I ask him, pretending to sound offended by this. "She seemed rather shocked to hear you had a friend."

"First off, your voice sounds really different on the phone than it does in real life. And two, pfft, \_no\_. She never asks about my friends, so I never tell her about them."

"Hm. Seems fair enough. Though I do feel somewhat insulted that I'm not important enough to you for your parents to know about my existence. For shame, Mister Overland. For shame."

"Oh, boo hoo," Jack laughs. "Why are you calling anyways? The race is in, like, an hour and a half, and I wanted to go out and practice some before- oh! You think you can come over and we can bike to this racing place together, maybe race some for practice?"

As the words of the race only about an hour away are mentioned, I feel something drop to the pit of my stomach and then start to make

its way back up my esophagus. This is the part of this conversation that I wasn't looking forward to, but I guess I have to tell him, since he's going to find out anyways.

"Yeah, uhâ€¦ about thatâ€¦" I go. "I have someâ€¦ really not so awesome news."

"Uh oh."

"Yeah. Umâ€¦ so apparently my dad decided to make lunch plans without telling me for today? And, wellâ€¦ they kiiiiiiiiinda occur \_during\_ the race, soooooâ€¦"

"Soooooâ€¦ you're not going to be able to make it to the race?"

I pause, hearing the obvious pain in his voice that I can tell he's trying to his best abilities to mask - and failing miserably. Even though I can't see his face, I know what he must be thinking: we worked so hard for so many hours at making him a good biker, and now I won't even be there to see him race.

"I'm really, really sorry, Jack," I tell him, pacing from my bathroom door to my desk on the other side of my room, Toothless watching me with curiosity. "Trust me, I'd \_much\_ rather be there cheering you on than at this stupid lunch thing."

"Who's it with? The lunch."

"My dad's new girlfriend or whatever and her daughter."

"Oh."

"Jack. \_Gods\_, I'm sorry. I know-"

"No, Hiccup, stop," Jack tells me with a sigh. "Iâ€¦ it's okay, really. I understand. You can't do anything about it, andâ€¦ and that's okay. I'll just get Fish to take me."

"Okay," I breathe, closing my eyes and rubbing my forehead in anguish at this whole awful situation. "Justâ€¦ you're gonna do great, you know that? You really are."

"You think?" I can tell by the uncertainty in his voice that he's beginning to doubt himself, and I really hope it isn't all because of the unfortunate news I just told him.

"Duh, of course, you idiot," I tell him with a laugh, earning a chuckled from his side of the line.

"But what if I get hurt? Lout's a lot better of a biker than me, soâ€¦"

Astrid's threat from a couple of days ago echoes in my mind as he says this, but I dismiss them before I can begin to dwell on them too much. "You're gonna be fine. There's no way you're gonna get hurt, 'kay?"

"Really?"



"Yeah. I promise. You'll be fine. I mean, you've practiced too hard for too long not to win this thing. Go show Lout that he can't just pick a fight with anyone, alright?"

He lets out a more heartfelt laugh. "Yeah, yeah, Okay."

We talk for a while after that, me trying to lighten his obviously downcast mood, but after about half an hour, my dad knocks on my door, telling me that we're going to be heading out soon. I tell Jack that I need to get off, and he replies by telling me that he should probably call Fish to get a ride anyways, so it's all good. Wishing him good luck, I can tell that maybe some of his confidence has been restored, but not all of it. I just hope that, by some miracle, something - anything - will happen in order for him to feel better about his himself and his racing.

As my dad and I make our way into town to this restaurant ten minutes after hanging up with Jack, I don't say one word to him. My silence towards him doesn't really matter though, considering he doesn't make any attempt to talk to me either.

The restaurant that we arrive at is this little mom-and-pop kind of place, giving off that real homemade kind of vibe that I normally find appealing, only I really don't want to be here. As my dad tells the host standing by the door that we're here with Bertha Bog, I examine the crowded and almost overwhelming interior; each of the four walls are coated with random street and various other signs, vintage and newer photographs of all sizes of random people, those glowing banners for beers and other drinks, and other such things. Booths line the walls, and small, round tables litter the center of the large room, their surfaces covered with a sheet of glass to protect postcards and photographs stored underneath them.

I recognize Bertha right away as our host walks us to a booth near one of the back corners, further away from the kitchen. Across the table from her though sits an unfamiliar, small head of bright blonde hair, appearing to have not been tamed this morning in the slightest. As we get closer and Bertha greets us with a sweet, "There you two are!", I notice that the hair has two hands that are furiously scribbling away on a piece of paper.

"Stoick, Hiccup," Bertha tells us after we've taken our seat, "this is my daughter, Cami."

The small girl's head pops up at the sound of her name, and she quickly turns towards me, showing off a pair of pale, baby blue eyes, faint freckles spotting her cheeks. After a moment, she shoves the piece of paper she had been drawing on towards me, and I look down at it to see a bunch of scribbles done with green and red crayon that make the outline of an odd looking animal-like thing.

"It's a dragon," Cami tells me, sounding like this should be obvious. She turns and grabs another piece of paper out from a small, turquoise colored bag positioned in the seat beside her.

"Cami likes dragons," Bertha tells me with a laugh. "They're her favorite animal." I attempt to smile back, but I know I do an awful job at it. As much as I want to like this woman - mostly for my dad's sake - I just can't get myself to do it. She truly seems like a nice person that I would normally like to have a conversation with, but

there's just this wall blocking me from being able to get passed the idea that she's now my dad's \_girlfriend.\_

Cami begins to scribble furiously on another sheet of blank paper with a purple and yellow crayon at the same time as our parents go into their own separate conversation, appearing to be talking about the menu and what to order. Cami turns towards me all of the sudden and asks, "Do you like games?"

"Uhâ€|" is all I can say in response.

"Wanna play a game?"

"Uhâ€|"

"You say uh a lot. Is that your name? Can I call you Uh?"

"My name isn't Uh."

She narrows her eyes, leaning towards me. "Then what is it?"

"Hiccup."

"Pfft. \_That's\_ a stupid name."

I let out a sigh. This girl can't seriously be ten, can she? I've only been talking with her for not even a minute now, and I feel like I'm exchanging words with a preschooler.

The waiter finally arrives, and we all order what Bertha suggests, since she knows what's best on the menu. I glance at said menu as she places our orders, and I discover that there really isn't that much of variety here. At realizing this, I begin to wish I had made an escape for Jack's house when I had to chance, skipping out on this lunch entirely.

After the waiter leaves and our parents start talking about what sounds like business talk, Cami turns back towards me, shoving another scribbled picture of what I assume is a dragon my way.

"Wanna play a game?"

"Depends," I tell her. "What kinda game are we talkin' about here?"

"Depends," she throws back at me. "What kinda games are you into?"

I pause, thinking over her question. By the looks of things, Bertha and my dad are probably going to do most of the talking, and it appears that that talking is only going to be between each other. I decide, for my own sanity, that playing along with this weird, little girl is probably my only option as to keeping myself occupied for the remainder of lunch. I decide to embrace this.

"I like thinking games," I tell her.

She nods and turns towards her backpack again, sticking her small hands into it and shuffling things around. After a moment, she pulls

out two sheets of crumbled up paper and hands one to me from under the table, looking like she's trying to be all secretive about it. Not going to lie, but this manages to get a smile out of me.

"What's this?" I ask, putting the paper in my lap and glancing down at it.

"Scavenger hunt," Cami tells me. "When my mom takes your dad to go meet my Uncle Erik after they're done eating, we start, okay?"

I'm a little taken aback by these sudden instructions, but I nod nevertheless.

Our food arrives within minutes of Cami's and my agreement, and as I try to eat my generic hamburger, Bertha decides it's a good time to bombard me with questions about myself and everything that can possibly branch off of that. I answer them to my best ability between bites, only doing it to humor my dad, who gives me an unapproved look when I tell her the story of the one time when I changed my name in his phone to God, and when I heard him swear from in the other room, I texted him `'I HEARD THAT'`, which confused and frightened him beyond belief. My dad doesn't find this quite as humorous as Bertha does, who laughs so hard, she nearly chokes, but oh well. You win some, you lose some.

Once all the food on our plates have vanished for the most part - Cami refuses to eat her green beans her mom ordered her - Bertha takes my dad into the backroom of the restaurant to meet her brother, just like Cami had told me she would. Once the door closes behind them, the small girl turns, locking eyes with me, and says, "Ready?"

"One question," I say back, pulling out the sheet of paper she had given me earlier.

She lets out a heavy sigh as I hear her crawling under the table and to the opposite side as me, where our parents had been seated only moments ago. "What's your question, Burp?"

"Hiccup."

"\_Whatever\_."

"Where am I expected to find a potato?" I ask, pointing out the word on the piece of paper.

"We're in a restaurant that has a couple of dishes that involve potatoes," she tells me simply. "It really isn't that hard to find one. Someone's bound to order one today."

"What exactly are you sayingâ€|?"

"What do you `_think_` I'm saying?"

I stare at her for a moment, letting what she's told me sink in. I suppose it's safe to say that I'm about to participate in the strangest scavenger hunt ever.

"Ready `_now?_`" Cami asks again, not even trying to hide her

impatience. I nod in return, and before I know it, she does a quick count down and, upon hitting three, she's off, disappearing around the corner into some unknown territory of the building.

Well. This is should be interesting.

Most of the objects on the list are pretty simple to find, though they do prove to have their own complications. Number one, written in which I guess is Cami's nearly illegible handwriting, is a yellow gumball. I recall a gumball machine sitting in the front of the restaurant, so I assume this gumball is going to be easy to obtain. I'm proven wrong however when I put a quarter in the slot and receive a blue instead of a yellow. Another quarter gets me a green, and another a red. I end up having to spend \$3.25 in quarters, and even get a few strange stares from onlookers as I stuff my short's pockets with gumballs, just to get the yellow one I need.

On finding the yellow gumball, a box of cheap crayons without a green inside, a bent fork, and a sugar packet opened but not used, I come to the point where I'm told to retrieve a potato, and it's then that I decide it's probably about time to call it quits on this whole scavenger hunt deal.

I wander back to our table, holding the items I was able to find in my hands. Once I get there, I see that Bertha has found her way back to her seat, her chin resting in the palm of her hand as she stares out the window, a vacant look on her face. She must see me out of the corner of her eye though, because she turns and lets out a smile and, at seeing all the odd objects in my hands, says, "Oh dear. Has Cam got you on one of her scavenger hunts?"

I nod, taking a seat on the opposite side of the booth, putting the objects down on the table.

"Sorry about that. She had this thing withâ€¦ well, I don't really know how to put it. She's a bit of an oddball, isn't she?"

I nod again, allowing a smile to slip. She's an oddball alright, to say the least.

"Please tell me you didn't find the potato."

I shake my head. "I decided to quit when I reached that one."

"Well, thank the gods for that."

"Where's my dad?" I ask after a second pause.

"Still in the back," she tells me, resting her hands out on the table now. "Him and my brother are getting along a lot better than I expected."

"That's good."

"Yes, it is."

Another moment of silence comes upon us, and I'm forced to look in the opposite direction of Bertha, studying some of the other fellow diners eating their lunches. I get this weird feeling in my chest, like I know I should be talking to her, but I can't get my mind to

think of anything to say, even if it my mouth would allow me to say them to begin with.

Bertha's the one that breaks the silence in the end.

"Hiccup," she goes quietly. When I look over at her, she's looking right back at me, her kind, blue eyes that are identical to her daughter's making it to where I can't pull away. "Listen. Your fatherâ€| heâ€| he told me about what happenedâ€| with your mother."

I feel the bones in my back and shoulders stiffen. It's then that I'm able to wrench my eyes off of her and retreat them down at my own hands. If I had known that this unexpected conversation would be occurring today with this woman, I would've made a much better effort at sneaking out to Jack's to go to the race instead. The last thing I want to talk about with not only Bertha, but with anyone for that matter, is the subject of my mom.

"I know that, wellâ€| he hasn't gone out and seen other women since it happened," she continues, "and that's completely understandable. But now that he'sâ€| well, now that we're together--"

The feeling moves into my chest, making it a bit of a challenge to breathe.

"-I feel like I need to make one thing clear with you." She doesn't say anything after that, so I look up, to see if she's trailed off or something. When our eyes meet again, she goes on. "I know that you had a veryâ€| very strong bond with your mother, and that her death had a veryâ€| well, a very large impact on you. Right?"

I want to speak, I really do, but it feels like there's a wad of something stuck in the back of my throat, making me unable to say a word. I weakly nod my head instead.

"But I want you to knowâ€| well, that I'm not here to try and replace her. Okay? I justâ€| I don't want the loss of your mother to get in the way of any type of relationship we could have. I've heard only good things about you from your father, and I--"

"Hey! Cheater!"

Bertha's monologue is cut short at Cami arriving back at our table, her arms filled with each object I assume I was supposed to find. She's giving me a death glare, her blue eyes narrowed as she places all of her treasures in front of me, mixing in with mine.

"Camille Bog, I was talking. It's rude to--" Bertha begins to lecture her daughter, but Cami doesn't appear to hear her over her own frustration with me.

"You couldn't have finished finding everything before me!" she goes, her hands on her hips as she continues to glare. "No one's ever beat me at one of my own games!"

"Don't sweat it, kid," I tell her, finding the words in me to speak again. "I only got to number five on the list. I forfeit. You win." I toss her the yellow gumball I had spent too much money on, and she catches it rather easily in her small hand.

At the news of me giving me, a large, toothy smile spread across the young girl's face as she looks up from the gumball. She jumps up and down a bit on her toes, then pushes me over in the booth seat so she can squeeze in beside me, popping the gumball into her mouth. "I bet you didn't have enough guts to find the potato!" she sings through smacks. "No one ever has enough guts to find it but me!"

Laughing at this, I ask her where she found hers, and as Cami goes into great detail about her adventure in the back kitchen against the chefs, I notice Bertha staring out the window again, her chin back in her palm, that vacant expression on.

I want to feel sorry for not responding to her earlier when she made such an effort to talk to me. I want to feel sorry for making it seem like I have this grudge against her simply because she's my dad's new girlfriend who claims she won't try and replace my mom.

But if I were to admit to that, then I'd be lying.

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Fish is the one that drives me to the racing grounds after my parents' backs are turned and I'm able to sneak out without their knowing. I discover upon arriving that this said racing ground is just an abandoned amusement part, only it's smaller than the ones that I read about in Emma's books back home. As we pull into the desolate parking lot, a few other vehicles spotting the vast space - people here to watch the race, I assume - I notice the faded colors of long forgotten tents and unfinished rides.

"They began building it back in, like, the mid 1900's," Fish tells me as we get out of his car. "It never actually opened or anything. Apparently the budget for the rides weren't enough to make them safe enough to ride, so they ended up just scraping the entire project."

"That's sad," I say as I unhitch my bike from the back of his car. I do it rather effortlessly, which I'm proud of, since I had been practicing on mastering this skin, as lame as that may sound. I guess I just didn't want to embarrass myself when the time came for me to do it around other people. "Berk could use a carnival like this. You know, so people can have something fun to do every now and then."

Fish shrugs as he takes my gear out from the backseat, locking the car after he shuts the door. "Well, in a way, we are making the most of it. We use it to race, y'know."

There's something beautiful, yet haunting about the deserted carnival ground. After Fish and I crawl through the opening in the rusted, locked gate, I find ourselves standing at the very start of a long, dirt pathway, booths and stalls, some caving in on themselves, surrounding us on both sides. Some of the booths I can tell were meant for games; I can see their beaten targets with their faded red and white paint hanging on walls inside, stout stands without fake

guns attached where a child would stand to shoot and try and win a prize. In the distance, I'm able to see what I assume was supposed to be a ferris wheel, only the wheel part never quite made it on to its stand. A wooden roller coaster, its beams bent and broken in some places, glides over tents and booths, abruptly coming to an end, showing that it had never been finished.

Once we've walked the entirety of the "main street", we come to a small roundabout, several other paths branching off from the center, which holds a worn looking merry-go-round. I notice once we move past it that the paint's chipped from the faces of honestly horrifying looking animals, and some of them haven't seen a coat of paint to begin with.

Looking down at my feet, away from the creepy children's ride, I see a white arrow, spray painted into the gravel. I point this out to Fish, and he tells me, "That's a part of the race. They tell you where you gotta go."

"They're all over the place then?"

"Yep. We're actually almost to the starting line, I think."

We turn the corner around an out-of-order fortune telling machine, and I see this said starting line. It isn't at all like I had been expecting; the same spray paint that made up the arrow from before makes up a thick line, spanning across the ground a good ten yards. Other than that, there really isn't much there. A good dozen of people are waiting around though, only one with a bike, who I recognize as Lout instantly. As we approach, I see that the damage I had done to his precious bike two weeks ago has completely vanished, like they had never even happened.

"Fish! Over here!" I hear someone yell from the pack of people. As Fish waves and starts ushering me towards the voice, I see that it's that Astrid girl that Hiccup introduced me to a couple of days ago. Her blonde hair, pulled back into a thick braid, flies behind her as she meets us halfway.

"Hey, Astrid!" Fish goes. "How's the competition lookin' today?"

Astrid rolls her blue eyes, brushing her bangs out of the way. "Do I really have to answer that? I mean, this is Lout we're talkin' about here. He's all the competition this kid's gonna need." She turns her head slightly in my direction and gives me a quick smile, which I return. She then looks around, a confused expression making its way on to her face, and asks us, "Where's Hiccup?"

"He couldn't make it today," I explain to her quickly. "Something popped up."

She rolls her eyes again. "Of\_ course\_ something popped up."

Before I can defend him, some other girl with a long face and even longer blonde hair standing with everyone else calls out her name. Astrid starts heading over towards the girl, waving back at us and telling me that if I need help with anything, I can just call for her.

Fish takes me up to the starting line, and as I put on my gear, he double checks my bike to make sure everything's in shape. I see Lout, wearing a very peculiar helmet with what appears to be ram horns planted on the sides, checking out his bike as well. A skinny, blonde boy that looks oddly like the blonde girl from before walks up and starts pushing a pair of elbow and knee pads towards him, but all Lout does in response is gives him a glare and swats the gear away, saying something that makes the blonde boy wander off in defeat.

"Well, everything looks a-okay to me," Fish tells me, taking my attention away from my competitor. As he puts his hands together, I notice him taking a quick glance over his shoulder, and as I peer over him, I see that he's sneaking peeks at that same blonde girl from before, who's still talking with Astrid.

"Do you want to go talk with them?" I ask.

He looks shocked by my question, probably not expecting me to catch on to his action. "Oh, no. Pfft, no. It's totally fine. I don'tâ€|no."

"Fish, you can go if you want," I tell him. "I have my gear on and you checked my bike. I'm good to go. Now you go and talk with your friends."

"Really?"

"Of course."

"Y-you sure?"

"Fish, yes. I'm sure."

The large boy gives me a grin, thanking me and wishing me luck on the race, just in case he doesn't catch me before it starts.

"You're gonna do great, Jack!" he yells back at me as he jogs over towards the girls.

"Yeah, thanks," I say back, only he doesn't hear me. Probably for the better though, since I honestly don't feel any real power behind my words. After Hiccup had told me that he would be skipping out on the race, there's just been this hollow feeling in my chest. I know he really wanted to come and that he was being pretty much forced to go to this lunch, but I can't help but feel a little, wellâ€|abandoned.

"Nervous?"

I turn around, breaking away from my negative thoughts, to see Astrid standing in front of me.

"A little," I say truthfully.

"Good. If you weren't, I'd be concerned." She walks up , standing on the other side of my bike, and gives me a look like she's asking if it's okay for her to touch it. I nod and smile, watching her trace her long, black painted fingers over the handlebars and seat.



"This is really nice bike," she says after a moment.

"Thanks. It used to be a lot cleaner, but after all that practicing with Hiccupâ€¦ well, it got kind of beaten up. Not too bad though."

Astrid doesn't say anything to this, just continues to inspect the bike in front of her. Only her expression has changed, I do notice that. Before my comment, she had had a grin on her face, like she was really appreciating checking out my bike. Now, after bringing up Hiccup and our training sessions, she appears to be thinking something over in her mind.

"You don't have to race, you know," she tells me abruptly. By the look in her eyes almost hidden behind her bangs, I can tell she seriously wants me to consider this option, but I decide not to budge. I've practiced too hard, gotten too many scars and bruises, to back away from this now.

"I know," I tell her.

"I mean, Lout's a really dirty racer. The odds of your winning are slim."

"I know."

"You may even get really, really badly hurt."

I knock my fist against my helmet, which now fits me, after a few readjustments. "That's what I have this for."

She removes her hands from my bike, placing them on her thick hips. "Did some of Hiccup's stubbornness rub off on you or something?"

I shrug. "I guess so."

Her eyes are closed and she's shaking her head, and for some reason, seeing this makes me feel a little agitated - agitated at her obvious disapproval for Hiccup's teachings and my racing, and to make it even more agitating, she isn't even trying to hide it.

"He really isn't that bad," I tell her cautiously. "I mean, yeah, he can be a little sarcastic at times, but he means well. I mean, he didn't even have to teach me how to ride, but he did." I decide to stop there with defending Hiccup, despite my want to go on, since after what I saw and was able to overhear while at The Ring the other week, I gathered that this girl has quite a fiery attitude, especially when provoked. Though I want to show her that she can't just throw insults at my friend, I don't necessarily want to push her over the edge.

"Yeah, I know," I hear her say under her breath, a lot more calmly than I had expected. "It's justâ€¦ sometimes he can be a real nuisance. He's always been like that, ever since we were kids. Like, you'll tell him to do one thing, and then he'll go and do the complete opposite. It's like he lives to piss me off, y'know?"

"He likes you," I say without thinking.

She isn't looking at me as I say the words, but I can tell that she

hears me.

"Not in that friend kind of way either," I go on. "Likeâ€¦ in a romantic kind of way."

She lets out a small sigh at this. "I know."

"Then why are you so mean to him?"

That gets her attention. As her eyes lock with mine, I can tell she wants to throw something back at me, make me look like a fool instead of her, but she can't. I know she can't. I know because what I said is true, and she knows it is too.

"Iâ€¦ I don't know," is all she tells me.

"That's not a really good reason."

"I knowâ€¦"

A teen that looks around my age with a tattoo on his shoulder, holding what I think is called an air horn, yells that the race is about to begin. As I move my bike up to the starting line, the tattooed teen says something else about each racer getting their "token of luck".

I turn towards Astrid, still standing on the other side of my bike. "What's that?"

"It's this stupid racing tradition that some idiot made up years ago," she tells me, rolling her eyes. "Each racer has to find a person of the opposite sex, and they kiss their helmet. It's supposed to bring good luck or something stupid like that."

I look over at Lout to see a girl with shiny hair the color of sand standing up on her tip toes in order to plant a kiss on his horned helmet. Her friends behind her giggle as he winks at the girl before she scampers away.

"Oh, here," I hear Astrid say, and before I can even fully turn back towards her, she's grabbing the sides of my helmet, pulling me down to her level. After hearing the faint sound of her lips making contact with my helmet, I throw her a curious look.

"I thought you said it was stupid," I point out with a smirk.

She shrugs, not making eye contact with me as a hint of pink showing up on her cheeks. "Well, you need all the luck you can get."

"Thanks."

"Yeah, justâ€¦ just don't die, okay?"

The tattooed teen yells for us racers to get in position. Astrid wanders over back toward Fish and the blonde boy and girl, who I recognize as the twins I saw while at the skate park. Fish gives me a thumbs up as I mount my bike, and I try to give him a confident smile.

"When I blow the horn," the tattooed teen tells both Lout and me, showing both of us the air horn in his hand, "that signals that the race has started. One lap around the track, and whoever crosses the finish line first, wins!"

I don't know why I do it, but I make the grave mistake of looking over towards Lout. His eyes are already on me, and he's giving me this hideous smirk that makes a shiver go up my spine.

I wish Hiccup was here.

"Readyâ€|" the tattooed teen goes.

I look forward, closing my eyes, and clearing my mind, just as Hiccup had taught me.

"Setâ€|"

My eyes open and focus on the track laid out in front of me, a straight away and then a turn, the track disappearing behind booths and stands. I know exactly what I need to do to get ahead of Lout before we even cover thirty yards.

The piercing sound of the air horn goes off, and I kick my feet off the ground, placing them on my pedals and pushing my weight forward.

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Right as my dad pulls into our driveway, a slight drizzle coming down from the graying sky, I make a beeline for my bike sitting in the garage. My dad doesn't even ask me where I'm going - just tells me to be careful with all this rain on the road - as I mount the seat and kick off, booking it down the driveway as fast as my wheels will let me.

Getting to the racing grounds take me a lot longer than I hoped. By the time I pull into the barren parking lot, the rain coming down from the sky is almost what one would call a downpour. I tread carefully over the concrete and through the gate, not wanting to make a wrong move and crash to the pavement.

Riding on the gravel is a lot easier than the parking lot, so I pick up my speed towards where I remember the starting line slash finish line is located. If they started the race at exactly noon, that means the race should be over by now, but people still have to be hanging around, since I noticed the handful of cars still sitting in the parking lot. When I reach the starting point though, there's no one in sight. I roll up quickly to the line and look over the carnival grounds, which is harder than it sounds, because of the curtain of rain.

"Jack?" I yell out to no one and, as expected, no one answers.

I push forward, rolling down the hill and on the track marked by the familiar white arrows. Looking back and forth between all the booths

and rides, I see no sign of any people being here before me. Maybe they rescheduled the race because of the rain? No, Fish would've called me to fill me in on something like that. The race had to have still happened - I just can't find anyone to prove that I'm right.

As I approach the base of the familiar ferris wheel, I begin to hear voices, causing me to pick up my speed. There's more than one, and some are speaking loud and faster than others, sounding panicked, which only sends a surge of panic through me.

I round the corner, and the very scene I had been praying wouldn't happen for the last two weeks is laid out in front of me.

The first thing I notice is the blood. There's a small trail of it, splotching the dirt and trailing over to the side of the track, the water pouring from the sky causing it to run through the small rocks, leaving a trail of red behind.

My knees go weak, but the shock and horror growing inside my body doesn't stop me from jumping off my bike, allowing it to fall to the ground with an echo of a crash, and running, running as fast as I can. The group of kids - maybe only three or four of them, I can't tell - standing off to the side, their eyes wide and mouths whispering words to each other that I can't hear, see me glide by them, but don't say a word to me. By getting pass them and towards what they're looking at, I can see a boy and girl, both who I recognize as Fish and Astrid instantly, crotched over a body, the name of that body I can't even think of without feeling sick to my stomach.

"What happened?" I yell through the rain as I approach the two. Fish turns quickly, his blue eyes telling me everything I need to know and wish I didn't know.

"Heâ€| heâ€|" Fish starts, but he's unable to finish. I push pass him hurriedly, not allowing him to finish, and come face to face with the same pale, blue eyed face I had only seen, laughing and smiling, just yesterday afternoon. Blood and dirt stain his white hair mostly hidden under his helmet, several large gashes still leaking blood outlining the left side of his jaw and upper arm, right above his elbow pad. It's on seeing his eyes that I notice that he's not completely gone from us though; no, instead of lying still, his body is seizing up, then relaxing at a very fast rate, his head being held in Astrid's lap, shaking rapidly.

Astrid looks up at me, fear in her eyes. I can tell that she's asking, begging, for me to tell her what to do.

"What's happening to him?" she yells up at me. "Is heâ€| is he having a seizure or something?"

I jump down beside Jack's shaking figure, putting my equally shaking hand on his face. I call out his name, hoping that it'll snap him out of whatever he's going through, but nothing changes. He continues to seize, then relax, his eyes wide and glossy, staring up at the pouring sky.

"Who did this to him?" I ask Astrid, not being able to look down at Jack anymore.

"You did this to him!" she yells back at me, anger suddenly in her eyes. "I told you, Hiccup! I told you not to let him race against him! But did you listen? No! You \_never\_ listen to me!"

She doesn't even have to say his name and I know exactly who she's talking about. I ignore her lecturing me, telling me this is all my fault - which I know it is. The fear I had been feeling earlier is completely washed away with the rain now, and is replaced with nothing but pure hatred for the person responsible.

I jump up and look over towards the crowd of kids staring, and standing near the front is Lout. His eyes meet mine as soon as they land on him, and his jaw tightens.

"WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM!?" I scream, hurling myself in his direction.

The small group of kids on either side of him disperses as he moves backward, yelling back at me, "I didn't do anything, I swear!"

"Oh, so he just \_fell\_ of his bike \_and\_ skid across the ground \_on his\_ own?"\_

"No, heâ€¦ he was in my way!"

My eyes grow wide as he puts his hands up to I guess protect himself against me, a wary and frightened look in his eyes. I wonder why he's scared, since I know I can't look \_that\_ \_threatening\_ to him, no way. As I connect the dots though using what he said, I feel my hands curl into fists, my breathing growing so heavy, it's almost too hard to breathe.

"YOU \_KNOCKED HIM OFF HIS BIKE?"\_

"He was in my way!" Lout defends himself. "I wanted to win so-"

"You wanted to win so badly, that you decided to knock him off his \_bike\_" As I yell each word at him, my throat throbbing, I can feel myself moving closer and closer in his direction. "Dear gods, \_Lout\_! That has got to be the lowest and most dirty thing I've \_ever\_ heard before in my \_life\_"

"It's not my fault!"

"How is this \_not\_ your fault!? It's \_all\_ \_your\_ fault!"

"The retard shouldn't have been allowed to race!"

Something snaps in me when he says those words - referring to Jack as a retard, yeah, \_that's\_ \_definitely\_ what got me - and I, so full of rage towards him and what he did to my friend, lunge myself at him, my fist up at the ready to strike. Lout looks like he's ready to fight back, his beefy arms put out in front of him like he was probably taught to do, but before I can make contact, I feel the tight grasp of someone wrap around my body, shielding me from Lout's attack and myself.

"Control yourself, Hiccup!" I hear Fish yell through the rain.

"Let me go!" I yell up at him, pounding my fists against his arms, encasing me. "He did this! He hurt him! I promised him this wouldn't happen! I promised him he wouldn't get hurt! I \_promised\_"

"Hiccup!" The voice this time is Astrid's, and the urgency in it is enough to make me forget about Lout and Fish and everyone else there. I snap my head in her direction, and she's still sitting on the soaked ground, Jack's head lying in her lap. "H-he's waking up! He's talking!" she yells at me, forgetting that this is all my fault for only a moment.

At hearing these words, I gain enough strength to force Fish to let me go; that or he lets me go on his own, seeing that my attention has been drawn away from getting revenge against Lout and towards Jack's wellbeing. I collapse beside Jack again as I hear Lout shout something through the rain and run off. To my relief, his white haired head turns slowly to look at me, his blue eyes only slits, blocking out the rain as it trickles down on to his cut up face.

"Jack! Oh gods, Jack! A-are you okay?" I say down to him, not being able to keep a smile from peeling across my face. "I'm so sorry! This is all my fault, Jack! I shouldn'tâ€¦| gods, I shouldn't have let you race!"

"My head hurts," is all he says back like he didn't hear a word I said. There's a confused look on his face, like he can't possibly understand how he got where he is.

"I bet it does," I laugh. I see Astrid out of the corner of my eye give me a dirty look, but I just ignore it. My friend's okay. He's alive and okay, and that's all that matters to me right now.

"Hiccup. Am I going to die?" he asks next, and I laugh again.

"Over my dead body."

I notice the deep gashes on his cheek, still leaking blood at an alarming rate. Looking up at Astrid, I say, "We need something to stop it. A towel or something. Anything."

"What about this?"

I look up and see Ruff, the girl twin that follows Lout around like a puppy, only she looks different. Her slanted, blue eyes aren't narrowed like they usually are when she laughs at one of Lout's jokes as he torments me, but instead they're wide and scared as the rain runs through her drenched, blonde hair. I see that she's holding out a piece of cloth in her hand, and I don't hesitate to grab it from her.

"Is he gonna be okay?" she asks as I press the white cloth against Jack's red cheek. Astrid answers her, but I'm too focused on Jack wincing at the pain of my touch to hear what she says.

"Hiccup. I need to get home," Jack tells me in a whisper once he gets used to the cloth being pressed against his cheek. "I got to getâ€¦| I got toâ€¦|"

"Shh, Jack, stop talking. You need to conserve your energy."

"But I got to get home."

"Why? \_Why\_ do you need to get home?"

A small smile that I hadn't been expecting makes its way on to his face as he whispers, "Emma. She'sâ€| she's leaving for camp tomorrowâ€| I got toâ€| I got to say goodbye to herâ€| before she leaves."

## 9. A Lot More Than Expected

**\*\*Ahh, sorry about the cliffhanger and long wait.\*\***

This chapter just really didn't want to get written. And me getting back into the mood for playing Sims 3 nonstop certainly didn't help matters. Oh well. It's here now, the longest chapter of them all (so far).

Waaaaaaaarning: there's some minor hints at Frostbite/Rainbow Snowcone here, so BE WARNED if you're not into that ship. It's nothing drastic; just kinda there, y'know.

Enjoy!

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The last thing I see before allowing my eyes to close is Hiccup's face, his green eyes lined with worry, but his lips holding a reassuring smile. He lets out a laugh as I slur out my words about being home to say goodbye to Emma, and that's when I allow myself to be taken in by the darkness. I know I shouldn't give in so effortlessly, but the pain in the back of my head is throbbing to the point of nausea and it's becoming hard to ignore. Maybe if I just close my eyes - even just for a moment - the strain I'm feeling will go away.

Allowing my eyelids to droop, I hope that my friend will know what to do, will take care of me for the time I'm drifted off. As I hear Hiccup say my name one more time, followed by words I can't make out, my eyes finally shut, enveloping me in pitch black.

I'm wrong about the pain. It only worsens as I drift further and further away from consciousness. The soft touch of Astrid's thighs against my head and Hiccup's fingers on my cheek disappear and are replaced by claws tearing away at my back, my friend's kind words masked over with harsh hisses.

It's when everything's at its darkest that the hooded figure that's haunted so many of my dreams makes its appearance. Its face is nothing but a pit of dark shadows, no features present, but I can still hear it beaconing me forward, whispering words to me that I don't want to hear.

\_She was better off without you.\_

\_They'll never see you as one of them.\_

\_It's all your fault.\_

\_You shouldn't even try.\_

So much for just giving in to the darkness. Even if I do willingly allow it to take me over, this hooded figure will still slither its way into my mind, just like it does when the darkness takes me over against my will. No matter how many times I shout at it to leave me alone - even breaking out of my comfort zone and getting feet away from its cold form - the figure won't take a hint. It only continues to taunt me, its hooked fingers waving me forward.

I decide that I've spent enough time in this living Hell. Though I may not have anyone in the outside world here to assist me, I know that I can trick myself out of this nightmare; I did it before while in the hospital, so I know I can do it again.

Blocking out the unwanted sound of the darkness' words, I think of the brightest things in my life; anything that will ward away this growing pain.

The gleam that dances across Hiccup's bike.

The glint of light that shines off of Tooth's necklace

The glow on Emma's face as she finally beats me in a game.

I know I picked the right moments to picture, because, before I know it, I'm looking up at a white, popcorn ceiling that I can only recognize as my own.

My name is Jack Overland.

I am seventeen-years-old.

I live in Berk with my parents and sister.

My best friend's name is Hiccup Haddock.

Phew. Good. I still have my memory.

"Jack?"

I turn my head slightly, blinking several times as my eyes adjust to the light above, to see my father, a grin slowly appearing on his tired face.

"He's awake, Mary! He's awake!"

The sound of footsteps heading towards my room meets my ears as my father helps me to sit up in bed, leaning my pillow against the wall to support me. I'm about to ask him what had happened when my mother bursts in, not hesitating a second as she strides up and wraps me into a hug.



I'm startled at first by her sudden and unexpected touch, but then I remember that this is what I've wanted all along. I return her hug, closing my eyes and burying my face into her shoulder.

"Oh, dear God," she sighs into my hair as I feel her fingers digging into my back. "We thought we had lost you again. We thought you were never going to wake up."

"I'm fine," I whisper, my voice hitching as the words come out. The dryness of my throat becomes apparent to me then. I wonder how long I've been out. It may have only felt like moments to me, but who knows how much time has really passed.

"Well, it's good to see you can talk this time around," my father says with a laugh after my mother releases me from her firm embrace. She turns quickly towards him, giving him a sharp look, and I can't help but smile at this exchange, despite the fatigue I'm feeling.

"Whether you can talk or not, we're just happy you're alright," my mother tells me, squeezing my hand in hers. Her skin feels so coarse against mine, something I hadn't expected. "We were so worried about you, C- Jack."

"How long have I been out?" I ask. "And what happened to me?"

A tense silence engulfing the entire room is followed, and I see the smiles that had previously been on my parents faces disappear. My mother doesn't seem to be able to look at me anymore as she removes her hand from mine, which only makes me want to reach out and grab it again. I had only just gotten her to open up to me; it's too earlier for her to retreat again.

"It's only been a couple of days," my father tells me slowly, looking down at the ground. "And, wellâ€¦ these two boys brought you to us. They said you'd been in some sort of bike accident while racing some other boy. Iâ€¦ I felt like I recognized the boys from somewhere though, but I couldn't put my finger on it. One was a bit bigger and the other..."

"Had a prosthetic leg?"

My father raises an eyebrow at me saying this, but nods nevertheless.

"You meetâ€¦ well, saw them while at The Ring a couple of weeks ago," I explain to him. "They were the two boys that asked me if I wanted to hang out."

"Which is never going to happen ever again."

My head snaps in the direction of my mother, still sitting on the side of my bed. Her face looks stern and solid, so I know that the words that had come out of her mouth were meant to be heard. At realizing this, I get the feeling that something is being drained from me. Be it the tiredness or something new, whatever it is, it's overwhelming.

"W-What do you mean?" I manage to stumble out.

"I don't want you seeing those boys again, do you hear me?" she continues as she lifts herself from my bedside, still sounding as rigid as before. "Whatever happened to you, they were involved, and there's no way I'm going to allow my only son to be accompanied with suchâ€¦ suchâ€¦"

"But they're my friends!" I shout. Judging by the way both my parents jump a little, it had been louder than I had intended.

"Jack, this is for your own safety," my father pitches in, even though I can tell the words he's saying don't seem to fit properly in his mouth.

"But they didn't hurt me!" I fight back. "Neither of them were even \_there\_ when I got hurt!"

"Did one of them teach you how to ride that bike though?" my mother asks.

"Huh?"

"That bike, Jack. You didn't know how to ride a bike when we first moved here, and suddenly you do. One of them had to have taught you how to ride that dreadful thing."

I'm cornered - I know it - and the frantic feeling inside of me is beginning to grow at a rapid pace. My mother is giving me this look that tells me she already knows the whole situation, but she wants me to tell her for myself. The earlier feeling of her hands pressed firmly against my back, her face buried in my hair as she made an effort to comfort me, evaporate and are replaced with rage. If I tell the truth that Hiccup taught me to ride that bike, then there's no way that she will ever allow me to see him again, and I hate her for this.

"Yes, he taught me how to ride it," I confess. "But that doesn't mean-

"From this moment on, you're not allowed to leave this house without one of us accompanying you, do you hear me?" my mother interrupts before I can explain myself. She lets out a sigh, turns towards my father, and says loud enough for me to hear, "The kids here are so dangerous, Will. Maybe we should just homeschool him. I think it'd be for the better. He'll be-

"You can't do that!" I yell at her. "They're my \_friends\_! Theyâ€¦ they didn't do \_anything\_!"

"You need to get some rest," my mother says sternly back to me as she turns and walks to the threshold of my door. "You look exhausted, and yelling at me is just going to make you more tired." My father, shooting me a sympathetic look, picks himself up from the chair beside my bed and begins to follow her out of the room.

"They didn't do anything! It was \_my\_ fault, not theirs!"

"Rest, Jack."

"This isn't \_fair\_!"

They close the door behind them, the click the door leaves behind echoing against my walls.

A whole next week somehow passes without me seeing another living being besides my parents. My father is away at work most of the time, but I discover that my mother had taken to working at home just to keep an eye on me to make sure I don't try and sneak out. She delivers meals to me the first day by tray, but I never touch them, in an immature way of rebellion against her. Hunger starts to get the best of me though by the second day, so I venture downstairs on my own to solve this problem. My mother is furious at this, since she's told me several times already that she wants me to stay in bed, but she leaves me alone as I prepare my own food.

For the first time ever, I experience the emotion of boredom. Since seeing Hiccup has been marked off the list, Emma would be my first escape from this prison my parents have trapped me in. The precious girl's away at summer camp though, so there's no one to play board games and hopscotch with. The sound of her laughter makes my stomach ache terribly, and I wish for her to come back home - even just for a day - so I can ruffle her hair and poke her tiny, round nose and say goodbye and that I hope she has fun while she's away.

On the fourth day, I hear the murderous sound of a lawn mower rip through the air, and after running to my window and peering out, I see a familiar auburn head of hair going back and forth across my lawn, his big, blonde friend whacking away at the hedges. That day is the first day I try to sneak out of the house, but my mother catches me even before I can get to the stairs - curse this house's creaky floorboards! I stay in my room for the remainder of their time there, watching them through my window as they diligently work. It isn't until right before they leave though that at least one of them notices my watchful eyes; Hiccup's just finished rolling the lawn mower into the back of a white van when our eyes meet. His hand moves into the air, his fingers slightly waving in my direction as he hesitantly gives me a skittish smile. I lift my hand in response, copying his movement and grin. Then, before I can even pull my hand back down, he gets into the van behind Fish, and is gone.

I wonder if he misses me. To be completely and brutally honest, I have to admit that I don't even know where exactly I stand with him when it comes to our friendship. For all I know, I'm just that kid that he was forced to teach to ride a bike, nothing more. He could absolutely despise my guts, never want to hear my voice ever again, but he could just be hiding it as to not hurt my feelings. I know I shouldn't be thinking these things, but for some reason, the thoughts won't leave my mind. The longer I stay locked away in my room, the more I want to walk right up to him and ask him if he even likes me.

It's the day before it's been a week of solitude from the outside world that I get my first visitor. My mother calls down for me, but I don't budge from reading on my bed, propped up against the wall. If she needs to tell me something, she'll have to come up here and tell me for herself, because I've decided that if I can't leave this house, then I'm not even going to leave my room. She only calls my name once though, and then her voice is replaced by footsteps making their way up the stairs, coming towards my closed door. I prepare myself for the worse, only to get the best.

Tooth is the one that slowly opens the door as I put my book down. She's wearing this pink and white dress that makes her eyes stand out against her dark skin, and for the first time, her hair is down, barely touching her shoulders. At noticing her outfit, I become strongly aware of the fact that I'm wearing a ratty, old shirt with a ketchup stain on the collar that I wish I could magically change out of.

"The Tooth Fairy's here to collect any of your missing teeeeeeeth," is her sing-song of a greeting to me. I find it rather hard to not allow a smile to peel across my face at this, which feels weird, since it's been awhile since I've smiled. "Have you lost any teeth lately, mister?"

I shake my head. "Not that I'm aware of, no."

She lets out a giggle - that I will admit is actually rather adorable. "I, uhâ€¦ I heard what happened. How ya doing?"

I shrug. "I'm alright."

"You sure? I heard you took quite a nasty fall." She takes a seat on the edge of my bed, resting her hands in her lap and shooting me a knowing look. "Were you wearing your gear, like last time?"

I recall the time she almost ran me over, and let out a laugh. "Yeah, I'm sure. I'm still in one piece, aren't I? No need to worry."

"Then how'd you get that?" she asks, scooting towards me a little and reaching out for my cheek. I feel her delicate fingers touch the healing scars on the side of my face, causing an odd feeling to travel down my spine. She moves her hand away, and I have the urge to reach out and grab it again, but I resist.

"A helmet only protests the top of the head," I tell her, "not the face."

She laughs. "True."

I ask her how she's been doing lately, and if I didn't find this tiny girl so interesting in the first place, with her multicolored highlighted hair and tooth necklace, I think I could say I would've gotten a little weirded out by the way she just keeps on talking and talking. There's something about her voice though - the enthusiasm behind her words as she tells me about her intern job at her dad's dentist office ending and how she's now babysitting these two little kids - that makes me want to tell her to keep on talking, even if it's nonsense, just so I can hear her voice.

"And what have you been up to then?" she asks once she'd done going on about herself. "I haven't seen you around town or anything lately. Have you just been locked away in here for the past week or something?"

"It's not as bad as it sounds, really," I lie, even though it is as bad as it sounds; not being able to interact with another human being, I've discover, is one of my major weaknesses. "I mean, I have tons of books to read, so it's not like I have nothing to do."

"But, I meanâ€¦ have you even seen anyone lately?"

"I'm seeing you right now."

She lets out a laugh, her cheeks bunching up under her pink eyes.  
"Besides me."

Shaking my head, I see the smile on her face fade a little.

"Hasâ€¦ has Hiccup not even come to see how you're doing? I meanâ€¦ he's, likeâ€¦ your best friendâ€¦ right?"

"My parents won't let me see him," I tell her quietly, breaking eye contact for the first time and looking down at my hands.

"And why's that?"

"They think he's to blame for the accident."

"Wellâ€¦ is he?"

I shake my head quickly, not wanting her to misjudge Hiccup. "It's my fault, really. It was stupid for me to race to begin with."

"Then why'd you do it?"

I shrug.

"Well, I honestly just think you need to get out of this house," Tooth tells me after I feel her study me for a moment. She gets up from my bed, placing her hands on his wide hips as she looks around.

"And how are we going to do that?" I ask, getting up with her. "My mother doesn't want me leaving the house because she's afraid I'm going to fall and scrap my knee or something."

Tooth doesn't reply right away, for she has this expression on that I assume means she's trying to think of a solution to my problem. After a moment of being in thought though, she snaps her fingers and turns towards me, a warm smile on her face.

"I got an idea," she tells me.

"And that idea would beeee...?"

"Remember how I said I'm babysitting those kids?"

I nod.

"Well, they can be somewhat of a handful. The older boy is nine and can take care of himself most of the time, but the girl's four and is still pretty demanding. She has to take naps and I have to make sure she eats all her lunch, especially when she doesn't like it."

"Tooth, where are you going with this?" I ask her, running my hand through my hair. As much as I love that she can just ramble on and on about something for days on end, right now really isn't the time; she's gotten me all excited about this said plan of hers, but what she's telling me right now doesn't seem at all relevant to the

situation.

She puts her hands up, motioning me to be patient. "I'm getting there, I'm getting there!" she laughs. "Just bear with me a sec. So, those two kids really aren't that bad to have to deal with. But my little sister - Aly, remember? - she just got released from this summer camp thing, so she needs someone to look after her."

"Aaaand I'm assuming that someone's going to be you?"

"Right. But now that I have to look after Jamie, Sophie, and her, my job's going to get tough."

"Wait, wait, wait," I interrupt her as she says the familiar sounding names. "Are you babysitting the, umâ€¦ oh, the Bennett kids? The ones that live down the street from here?"

A smile peels across her face. "Yeah! You know them?"

"Hiccup and I bought lemonade from them a couple of weeks back!"

"Huh. Small world."

"There's only five hundred people living in this town, Tooth."

She rolls her eyes at me, a smile on her face as she dismisses my comment. "But anyways. Aly's a real handful, not gonna lie. Having to look after her and Sophie is going to be a real challenge."

"What are you saying?"

She puts her arms out in front of her, like she's inviting me in for a hug. An even larger grin than before makes its way on to her face as she says, "You can help me babysit!"

I honestly don't know to react to this suggestion. It's not that I don't have anything against babysitting, considering that's all I've been doing for Emma the past five weeks, up until she left. Babysitting for different kids, though? I can't even picture that. Emma and I had fallen into such a good sync of doing things, had gotten so used to each other, that looking after a couple of new kids doesn't seem like something I would be able to do.

"I don't know, Toothâ€¦"

The small girl walks up to me after I make it obvious that I'm having second thoughts about her plan, and gently grabs my shoulder. "Jack, you need this," she tells me sternly, but still with care in her words. "You say you're okay with being locked away in here, but I know that no one would be totally okay with that. And you seem like someone who likes interacting with other people, so I know this must be hard for you, not being able to see your friends."

I look down at my feet, because I know everything she's saying is true. It's like this tiny girl standing in front of me was somehow able to look right through me and read my thoughts.

"Just give this a shot," she eggs me on. "You already know Aly, and

Jamie and Sophie are really good kids. You'd like Jamie. You remind me a lot of him."

I look up at her. "Really?"

She smiles back at me, removing her hand from my shoulder. "Ooooh yeah. Definitely."

"How are we alike?"

"How about you just come over tomorrow and we find out, hm?"

It's at that comment that I can't help myself from shooting a smile down at her. She's got me cornered, but I can admit that I really don't mind. No, I'm not one hundred percent sure that my mother will give in to this plan, but I know that I should at least try, for my sanity's sake mostly. Besides. If I can't hang out with Hiccupâ€¦ well, at least I can hang out with Tooth, right?

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I really, really, really hate to admit this, but not being able to hang out with Jack every day definitely is taking its toll on me; a lot more than I had expected, anyways.

Fish, Astrid, and I had delivered an unconscious Jack to his house - Astrid stayed in the car, claiming she didn't want to have any part in this - and his parents pretty much exploded at the sight of him. Well, mostly his mom. Before either of us could even manage to get out a simple sorry, she warned us to never even think about interacting with her son ever again, and then slammed the door right in our faces.

I thought she had overreacted, not going to lie, but I don't blame her for behaving so extreme. I decided to give the Overland's a day to cool down before venturing back out to their house to see if Jack was doing better. Even after that wait though, Mrs Overland made it pretty clear to me that I wasn't welcomed anywhere near their property. From knocking politely on their front door to throwing stones at what I hoped and prayed was Jack's window, she shooed me away, her tone rising with each attempt. After she threatened to call the cops, I decided it was about time to call it quits.

To put it simply, I don't know what to do. Fish always acts like he doesn't know who I'm talking about when I bring Jack up, and Astrid won't even give me the time of day anymore because of what happened. Talking to my dad about it isn't even an option, and as awesome of a feline friend as Toothless is, a cat won't be able to give me any helpful advice. The only other person I can think of to talk to is Jack, but then that just leads us around full circle, doesn't it?

I see him for the first time that following week when Fish and I are told by Gobber that we're to take care of the Overland's yard. As Gobber drops us off, I notice that what I assume is his mom's car is stationed in the driveway, telling me that trying to find a way to contact him would be pointless. I keep my eyes on the grass as I move

back and forth across the lawn, trying to ignore the fact that the very guy that I wish I could see is only fifty yards away, somewhere inside that house.

Two hours slip by pretty quickly, but that's probably only because I focus on Fish's hedge clippers snipping and my mower's motor growling for a large duration of the time I work. Before I know it, Gobber's white van is pulled up to the curb, the back doors swung open for me to stash the lawn mower back inside.

"You comin' or not, Hiccop?" Gobber asks me as he slams the van's back doors. "Got one more house to do before I can let ye go, you know."

"Yeah, I know," I sigh, slipping off my work gloves and stuffing them into my short's back pocket. As I look back up at Jack's house, I see a set of piercing blue eyes topped with a tuft of white hair peering out the top window down at me, catching me completely off guard. I wonder how long he's been sitting there, looking out of his window.

I have the feeling that Mrs Overland is going to come bounding out of the house any second now, yelling at me for even locking eyes with her son, but she doesn't. Instead, I raise my hand and wave up at him, trying to get out the best attempt of a smile that I can manage. I notice through the glass him raise his hand as well and smile, only it doesn't look like it usually does. It looks weak, defeated even, like he's trying to tell me he did put up a fight, but his parents wouldn't budge.

"Hiccup! Come on!" I hear Fish yell back at me. I turn and jump into the passenger side of the van, not looking back at my trapped friend.

The next house is pretty much about the same as Jack's, only I don't have his house right there in front of me to taunt me. This makes it so much more bearable, but only but a bit. I keep thinking about what I'm going to do once I've finished working, and when the idea of going and biking with Jack pops into my head on several occasions, I feel like bashing my head against the lawn mower's handlebar.

Finally, the two hours are up, and Gobber drops me off at my house, telling me to get some rest. I'm about to tell him I plan to, when I notice the car that I can only associate with Bertha sitting in our driveway. Great. This is the last thing I need to deal with right now.

Not wanting to have to encounter my dad and Bertha, I decide to slip through the backyard, hoping that opening the back door won't be too hard and that my mad dash to the stairs won't be too noticeable. My plan is foiled however when I close the back gate and hear a high voice yell, "Wow! You look really gross and sweaty!"

I turn away from the gate to see Cami standing up in my long-forgotten tree house, her normally wild, blonde hair pulled back into an even crazier pony tail.

"Good to see you too, Cami," I tell her with a sigh. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I have to go shower away all this sweat and sorrow." I



make a beeline for the deck stairs, but I'm stopped when I see Toothless sitting on the top step. He meows up at me as I pat his head and ask him how he got out here.

"I wanted to play with him, but he's meeeeeeeeeeean," Cami whines from up in the tree. "All I did was try and carry him up into this tree, but then he got all upset and started hissing at me."

"Why do you need Toothless up in the tree?" I ask her, taking a seat down next to the black cat. He crawls eagerly into my lap, rubbing his head against my chest, something he does when he wants to show me that he missed me while I was gone.

"His name's Toothless?"

"Yeah."

"But he has teeth!"

"He didn't when I got him."

"Why?"

"He was a kitten."

"Oh. Wellâ€¦ now that \_you're\_ here, you can get 'im to play with me!"

"I was actually gonna go inside and take a shower," I tell her, grabbing Toothless and beginning to get up from the steps. "I had a hard day at work, so I'm feelin' a little worn out."

"But I wanna plaaaaaaay with someone!" Cami protests, running her hands down her cheeks all dramatic like. "Mom's too busy being all gross and romantic with your dad, and that cat's all I got!"

"What exactly are you playing?" I know that there's no way that I'm going to go out there and actually play pretend with this girl, especially after having to experience that extremely weird scavenger hunt she sent me on only about a week ago. Maybe though I can give her some suggestions on keeping herself busy, something I've become a master at, since being an only child can get pretty lonely.

"Dragons!" she tells me throwing her hands into the air. "I'm the evil Dragon Knapper, and Toothless there is the last dragon I need to have captured every species of dragon known to man! But he's being a paaaaaaain and not cooperating!"

"Well, I think that may be for the better," I tell her with a laugh. "I'm not so sure I \_want\_ you capturing all the dragons. They deserve to be free, you know. Especially Toothless here."

"Too bad! I already have all of them stashed away up here! See?" She disappears back into the tree house and returns holding a small, purple, plush dragon, its long tongue dangling lazily out of its opened mouth. "This is just one of hundreds too! I have them all up here, locked in cages!"

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Well, that's not good, is it?" I go, scratching the back of my neck.

"Nope!" she says with a toothy grin. "And what are \_yooooou\_ gonna do about it?"

I know I said I wouldn't fall into this trap and start playing with her, but man, I just realized that I could really use a good pretend game right about now. If I were to just go inside, shower, and try to take a nap, all I'd be able to think about is Jack not being able to see me, Astrid not wanting to talk to me, and my dad and Bertha downstairs doing only the \_Gods\_ know what. Playing this weird, little game with this weird, little girl seems like the better option to me at the moment. And not to mention that I never really played that many pretend games growing up, considering my complete lack of friends, and when I did, I always ended up played the character I didn't like. Maybe this is my chance to finally play a decent game of pretend with someone, even if it is a good ten years too late.

"Well, I may just have to go up there and free all those dragons," is how I respond, a smirk on my face as I take the work gloves from out of my back pocket and throw them to the ground.

"You wouldn't \_dare,\_ " Cami hisses.

"How much you wanna bet?" I place Toothless down beside me, and he looks up, his green eyes staring as he meows and paws at my shoes. I crouch down to his level, grabbing his small snout in my hand, and ask, "You ready, bud?"

He lets out another meow, yanks his nose out of my grasp, and starts running towards the tree house at full cat speed, his black tail held high behind him. I follow suit, peeling my hat off my head and tossing it on to the deck steps.

"They're attacking! They're attacking!" Cami yells, running back into the depths of the tree house. "Prepare the fireballs!"

"The \_what?"\_ I ask, and I get my answer not in the form of words, but rather the form of tennis balls being launched at me from above. My arms automatically go up to protect the top of my head and face as I duck underneath the tree house, away from Cami's fire. Looking down at Toothless, standing at my feet, I yell, "Where did you she even \_get\_ those things?"

"They're mine!" I hear Cami sing from above. "I collect them so I can throw them at people that make me angry!"

I'm about to start climbing up the makeshift ladder installed on the side of the trunk, but then I notice that the door has been nailed shut. "No wonder this girl's got no one to play with," I say mainly to myself and Toothless meows in agreement. Crouching and placing my hand on the top of his head, I whisper, "We need to formulate a plan, bud. Got any ideas?"

The cat moves out from underneath my hand and darts to that wooden

picnic table we never use anymore only a couple of yards away. I look up as Toothless lands on the top of the table and notice that if I were to stand on it, then I'd probably be able to climb into the tree house's window.

"Good idea, bud," I praise the cat with a smile, and he meows back happily.

I count to three under my breath before sprinting for the picnic table, almost tripping as my prosthetic leg manages to snag itself on a root poking out of the ground. As soon as my sneakers land on the wooden surface with a loud thud though, I hear Cami scream from above, "ATTAAAAAAACK!" and I'm being pelted at again by countless tennis balls, causing Toothless and me to have to retreat to the safety of under the tree.

"You'll never get your dragons back, Dragon Conqueror! Hahaha!" I hear Cami laugh from above.

"Who said anything about me bein' the Dragon Conqueror?" I ask, panting heavily. This is actually proving to be a lot harder than I thought it'd be. I thought I'd be able to somehow just climb into the tree house without having to really try, but man, this girl's got this place fortified.

"That's why you wanna get all these dragons back, \_stupid\_!" Cami tells me, like I should've already guessed this. "These are all the dragons that you already conquered, and I stole them from you, so you're trying to get them back!"

"But that sounds just as bad as what you're doing! I don't want to be a conqueror of dragons!"

"Well, then what \_do\_ you wanna be?"

I look down at Toothless for any suggestions, but he just cocks his head back up at me; he's probably wondering why we're not attacking the crazy, little, blonde girl anymore, since he seemed to have been really enjoying himself doing just that.

"Can I be aâ€¦ I dunno. Dragon \_trainer?\_"

Cami doesn't say anything at first, which surprises me, since this girl always seems to have an immediate response to everything I say. Then she yells, "But where's the fun in \_that\_? Being a conqueror is a lot more cooler than being a stinky, old \_trainer.\_"

"I beg to differ," I say back, bending down and grabbing some of the tennis balls lying at my feet. Talking about my role in this game, I've realized, is a pretty good distraction; may as well start preparing for my next plan of attack. "Trainers, I think, have it much better than conquerors. A conqueror is feared by the people he conquers, and I don't want the dragons to fear me like they fear you. But to be a trainer, the dragons have to trust me, which means that they probably like and respect me too. So I'd much rather be a dragon trainer over a dragon conqueror."

I hear Cami make a "pfft" sound from above, followed by her saying, "Dragon Conqueror or Dragon Trainer, no matter what you are, there's no way you're ever going to get your dragons back!"

I run out from under the tree, Toothless close at my heels, and start pelting all the tennis balls I had managed to fit in my arms up at her. She lets out a piercing shriek, yelling, "COUNTER ATTACK! BRACE YOURSELVES!" as she dunks down out of view, giving me my chance to attack her fortress with her defense lines down. Toothless, the poor little guy, is already trying to push himself up off the ground and towards the window, but he's too small of course to reach. I continue to throw the tennis balls at the tree house, making my way quickly towards the cat as I hear Cami yelling inside, "This isn't fair! This isn't fair!" Dropping the remaining tennis balls and pulling myself clumsily through the window, Toothless meowing up at me loudly in encouragement, I'm somehow able to make it into the tree house in one piece. I fall against the wooden floor with a loud thud, making Cami give out a small yelp at seeing me. Our eyes meet as I sit up on my knees, and all I can think of doing is letting out a smirk as I move over towards where I can see she has all her stuffed dragons stashed. Before I can reach them though, the small girl pulls out what appears to be a plastic sword, pieces of duct tape wrapped around several parts of it, keeping it together.

"Prepare you meet your maker, Dragon Trainer!" she yells at me, pointing her sword in my direction.

"Now that's not fair!" I say, putting my hands up as to surrender. "I didn't know we were allowed to have weapons! I would've totally already killed you if I knew that!"

"Yeah, well, too bad! I win this-" she begins, drawing closer to me with the dull point of her sword nearing my nose, but then she's cut off by the sound of who I think is Bertha calling for her, telling her it's time to head out. Now that Cami's distracted, her head turned towards the window and her sword somewhat lowered, I take this as my opportunity to win this thing once and for all. In one quick movement, I dive towards the dragons, wrap my arms around as many as I can, and before Cami can even fully turn back towards me, launch them all through the air and out the window, yelling, "Fly away my children! Be free!"

Cami runs to the window, leaning out and looking down at the stuffed dragons littering the grass. "Moooooooooooooooooooooooooom!" she groans as I get up from the floor, a smile on my face, no doubt. "You distracted me from killing Hiccup, and that led to him winning the game! It's all your fault I lost now! Thanks a lot!"

I hear both my dad's and Bertha's laugh from outside, my dad's heavier and much louder than her more feminine one. "Oh, well, I'm sorry to hear that, sweetheart," I hear Bertha say, "but we need to get going. We have plans for dinner, remember?"

Cami lets out another groan and turns back towards me, giving me a stink eye. "You win this round, Dragon Trainer." I pretend to tip my hat to her, and she sticks her tongue out at me.

Once we've both successfully navigated our ways out of the tree house window and back on to the safety of the ground - when she jumped from the window and into my arms, my prosthetic almost completely gave out, which would've been a real problem for both of us if I hadn't caught myself somehow - Bertha asked why we didn't just use the door. I explain as we clean up the stuffed dragons that Cami here

had nailed it shut, guaranteeing that I wouldn't have an easy way of getting into her secure garrison.

"She nailed- oh Gods. Really?" Bertha goes, running her hand through her dark hair. "Was that really necessary, Cam?" She turns towards my dad, giving him an apologetic look, but he just waves her off, a smile on his face. I notice that the smile he has on is one that I haven't seen in a really long time - as in, like, several years long time.

Cami nods her head as she stuffs her last dragons into her turquoise backpack. "I had to make sure he wouldn't get in, Mom! That kinda stuff's important!"

Bertha laughs at this, mostly because she's probably just glad to see that my dad's not upset about her daughter nailing our tree house's door shut. "I don't doubt it is. Now come on. We gotta head out. Don't want to be late, now do we?"

My dad and I walk the two ladies to their car out front in the driveway, Toothless trailing behind us with a forgotten blue, stuffed dragon in his mouth. I take it from him, thanking him for finding it, and run to Cami as she's buckling herself into the car, our parents talking over what sound like business plans near the hood.

"Toothless found this," I say, passing it through the opened window towards her. "He musta fell into the bushes or something."

"Tell Toothless he can keep 'im," Cami tells me with a smile. "He's a really smart cat. Are you sure he isn't part human or mutant or something?"

I laugh. "Nah. I'm pretty sure I'd know about it if he was."

"Alright. Just making sure."

Cami rolls up the window as her mother tells her it's time to head out for real this time. Before she ducks into the car though, Bertha turns towards me, smiles, and says, "Thanks for keeping her entertained, Hiccup. I know she can be quite a handful sometimes."

Not sure of how exactly to respond to that, I just shrug; my dad's standing right there, looking at me along with Bertha, and for some reason, I feel like I'm being put on spot. "It's no problem," I tell her though, trying not to look too awkward just standing here with this weird, plush dragon in my hands. "I had fun."

I hear Cami knock on the window and she sticks her tongue out at me again. I do the same back.

They back out of the driveway, Bertha throwing the two of us a wave before pulling out into the street. Once they're gone, I'm about to tell my dad I'm going to head inside to take a shower, but before I can, I feel his large hand land on my shoulder, his finger squeezing a bit. He doesn't say anything when I look up at him; just gives me a small smile, lets go, and heads inside.

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By some miracle, my mother agrees to letting me babysit with Tooth at the Bennett's. Tooth tries to assure me that it's because my mother really does want me to get out of the house and make some new friends, but I know my mother better than Tooth; it's probably more of because she knows that, if I have my hands full with looking after small children, then there's no way I can possibly go and see Hiccup. Though this thought angers me, I decide to let it slide, because at least I'm being allowed to leave the house for the first time in a week.

The next morning, I leave at around 8:45 so I have enough time to walk from my place to the Bennett's. Tooth's familiar car is already positioned out in the driveway when I arrive, alongside a decrepit minivan that I assume is Ms Bennett's. Tooth had told me that she would probably be home to explain "the basics" to me, whatever \_that\_ means.

Once I knock on the front door, the first thing I hear is the barking of a dog from somewhere inside, then a woman's voice shouting words I can't make out. After a moment, the door is opened and there stands a curvy woman with her brown hair pulled back into a loose bun, black glasses framing her caramel colored eyes. A smile appears on her face when our eyes meet.

"Ah, you must be Jack," she says, putting out her hand towards me, her other holding on to the collar of a gray and white dog, bearing its teeth at me. "I'm Ms Bennett, but please, call me Margo."

I introduce myself, extending my hand and shaking hers briefly, something I've seen my father do with other people several times when we're in town shopping for supplies. I don't know quite what to think about calling this grown woman by her first name though. I once called my father by his first name, and my mother snapped at me for it. I just assumed after that that calling someone older than myself by their first name was against the rules.

As Ms Bennett is scolding the dog to be quiet - referring to it as Abby - Tooth makes her way into the foyer, holding the hands of whom I both recognize instantly as Aly and Sophie, both of them wearing what appear to be fairy wings on their back. Both of their tiny, round faces breaks out with toothy grins when they see me, and Sophie even starts singing, "It's an alien! An alien!" as she lets go of Tooth's hand and runs up to me and grabs my hand, the wings mounted on her back flapping behind her.

"Jamie! The new babysitter's here!" Ms Bennett calls up the stairs, still holding on to the collar of the dog. "Sorry about Abby here. She isn't very fond of strangers. I'll go put her out back real fast."

Tooth gives me a questioning look as Ms Bennett leaves, and I scoop the winged, blonde girl into my arms, noticing instantly the extreme weight difference between her and Emma. "Do I even want to know why she's referring to you as an alien?"

I shake my head with a smile as Sophie wraps her pudgy arms around my neck.

A grinning Aly lets go of her older sister's hand and comes skipping up to me, showing off the two missing side teeth that are just now beginning to grow back in.

"Hiiiiii, Jack!" she sings. "Remember me?"

"Oh, but of course I remember you!" I laugh. "It's little Baby Tooth!"

The young girl gives me a confused look. "Baby \_what?"\_

"Jack here nicknamed me Tooth, Al," Tooth explains to her little sister before I can. "I guess, because we look so much alike, he's decided to call you Baby Tooth now." She sneaks a peek up at me, sending me a smirk that I can't help but return.

"Hmâ€| Baby Toothâ€|" the little, winged girl goes, seeming to be thinking over this new name I've given her very hard. "Hey! I actually kinda like that!"

"Well, good," I say back. "Because that's your new name, okay?"

"Okie-doie!"

The small, brunet boy I remember serving Hiccup and me lemonade only week prior bounds down the stairs then, his eyes that are identical to his mother's widening when they land on me. I know he remembers exactly who I am when he slides on his socks up to me and asks, "How's the part robot doin'? Has he bruised anybody's shins lately?"

"You know it," I tell him with a laugh, glad to hear that he remembers our earlier conversation from what feels like ages ago. "The kid just can't help himself when it comes to kicking people in the shin, you know."

Ms Bennett walks back into the foyer before Tooth can ask me what on earth we're talking about, the faint sound of Abby barking in the distance. "Well, Miss Ana here already knows everything about these kids that needs to be known," she tells me. "But I guess I should just tell you the basics then. In the mornings, the kids are allowed to watch one hour of television, and Jamie's only allowed one hour of video games as well."

I nod my head, wondering what exactly this thing called "video game" is.

"Try and have them eat lunch sometime between noon and one. Jamie's got diabetes, so he needs to eat something then in order to keep his blood sugar normal. Ana can explain all that to you, since I really don't have the time to."

I nod my head again, curious as to what "diabetes" are and how exactly they affect a person when it comes to eating lunch.

"And please try and keep them away from anything sugary. One, it's not good for Jamie's diabetes, and twoâ€¦ well, they just don't need the extra energy. So just try and stick to anything healthy. I have a whole variety of food in the fridge, and you two are welcome to use whatever you want. Oh, and once you're all done eating lunch, Sophie's also got to take her nap."

Sophie moves in my arms and hides her face in the crook of my neck. "No naps! No, no, no!" she cries, her pink wings almost hitting me in the face.

"Sophie hates taking naps," Ms Bennett tells me with a laugh, "but she needs them or she gets really grumpy and becomes almost impossible to deal with. Getting her upstairs and into bed is a challenge sometimes, but once she's tucked in, she's usually out within minutes. After that, you guys can really do anything you want to do until I get home, which will be around five or six. Only an hour of television and video games though, so maybe take them outside, play a little. Anything you two are up for."

"Do you have board games?" I decide to ask out of the blue.

Jamie nods his head. "Oh yeah! We got a whole closet full of 'em!"

"Sweet," I go, hoping they have the same games that Emma and I used to play. "I love board games."

"Well, sure, playing board games would be great," Ms Bennett tells us with a smile. She looks down quickly at her watch and grimaces. "Ah geez. I gotta head out." She picks up a black purse from the kitchen counter beside her, pulling out a shiny set of keys from within it. "If anything happens, Ana, you know how to contact me. If I'm going to be home later than usual, I'll give you two a call, okay?"

Once Ms Bennett's out the door and down the road in her car, Tooth tells me what I need to know about the care of Baby Tooth, which really isn't that much; more or less the same things as Ms Bennett had told me about her own two children, minus the nap and diabetes thing. The entire time though Tooth is filling me in on everything Ms Bennett left out for time sake, Sophie is pretty much inseparable to my neck, and I notice that Jamie keeps looking up at me, a toothy grin on his face. I haven't even spent half an hour with these kids yet and I already love them.

For the remainder of the morning, the five of us mainly just hang out in the living room area. For the first hour, Jamie shows me all his impressive video games, many of which are just fighting games where you and your opponent select a character and battle to the death. At first, I have no idea what I'm doing; I somehow get by by just smashing every button on the peculiar looking device that Jamie tells me controls my character on the screen, who I keep getting confused with his. We have to pause on several occasions so Jamie can explain to me what each button does, and even after that, I still get mixed up with which button does what. I catch Tooth, sitting on the couch playing a game called Uno with her sister, sneaking me smirks and giggling when I die or mess up badly. I stick my tongue out at her at one point, and she giggles, shaking her head as she places another card down in front of her. Jamie asks me in a whisper if Tooth is my girlfriend, which I just shrug to, since I don't know what exactly a



"girlfriend" is.

Once one hour of video gaming is up, Tooth unplugs the console without warning us, making Jamie groan with irritation since we were in the middle of a very intense battle. Tooth tells us to chill and that we're welcome to join in on Baby Tooth's and her \_Uno\_ tournament, Sophie playing with her dolls as she just watches, since apparently she's too young to understand the rules. It takes some time, but Tooth, Baby Tooth, and Jamie are able to explain to me the rules of the game, since I've never played it before. Jamie wins a nice handful of rounds, claiming that \_Uno\_'s his favorite game and that he's the master at it, but Baby Tooth breaks his streak once when she surprises him with a unexpected skip card that she had been hoarding just to make sure he loses, allowing Tooth to take the win for herself. I don't win one round, but I really don't mind, not really. Watching the three of them argue and get so into the game makes me forget that I'm even trying to win.

When lunch rolls around, I let Tooth do the food preparing, since the only thing I know how to make are peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. She somehow pulls out all this healthy food from the fridge, things like carrot sticks and apple sauce, and puts them all on plastic plates as I help Sophie and Baby Tooth wash their hands in the kitchen sink. As the girls are eating, Tooth assists Jamie with what they call his "insulin pump", Jamie explaining the basics of what each button does and how he has to check it regularly to make sure his glucose levels are normal. I don't ask too many questions, mainly avoiding the obvious ones at all costs, because I don't want either of them - mostly Tooth though - giving me weird looks like Hiccup used to give me.

Once the plates are mostly cleared - we tried unquestionably hard to get Baby Tooth to finish eating the rest of her carrot sticks, even going to the extreme of making it appear like her stuffed rabbit, Bunnymund, had taken a bite out of some of them to encourage her - we begin our mission at getting Sophie upstairs and into her bed for nap time. Tooth and I spent a good five minutes chasing the young girl around the house, her wings seeming to become somewhat of an advantage to her since she was somehow able to outrun us, and then the next ten minutes are spent with us searching under every piece of furniture and behind every door to find that little stinker. Jamie was the one that ended up finding her stashed away in the incredible cramped laundry hamper upstairs, and I had to be the one to carry her screaming and kicking body into her bedroom, Tooth closing the door and holding it shut to ensure that she wouldn't escape once I put her down in her bed. Once I had her under her blankets and snuggled in with all her stuffed animals, despite wearing a frown the entire time, she eventually drifted off into a deep sleep, much to Tooth's and my relief.

Once I make it out of her room without waking her, Jamie is rushing into his room across the hall, telling me that Tooth is getting something called a "slip'n'slide" ready for us to play on outside. I'm about to ask him what he's talking about, but his bedroom door is shut before I can.

Going out into the backyard, I see Tooth blowing up some odd piece of colorful rubber with this pump device as Baby Tooth, now wearing a bright pink and green stripes bathing suit, drags the gardening hose over towards her sister.

"Oh, there you are, Jack," Tooth greets me when she looks up. Abby, who's lying down next to her, begins to get up at the sight of me, a low growl escaping her mussel, but Tooth grabs her collar and settles her down. "I totally forgot to mention yesterday that I told the kids that we could play on the slip'n'slide today. Do you mind getting your shorts wet at all?"

I shake my head. "Nah, it's not a problem. Anything I could do to help?"

Tooth gets up, letting Abby's collar go. Surprisingly, the dog continues to lie on the ground, staring up at me with narrowed eyes. "Not really, no. Just have to wait for this thing to blow up, then we can put the hose on it and start our slippin' and slidin'!"

Jamie runs out a moment later, now sporting sky blue and white checkered swim trunks and interesting goggles that look like shark eyes. As the slip'n'slide is about done getting blown up and Tooth is setting up the hose, he shows me this cool transforming robot toy he has that has wings that pop out with the touch of a button and glows in the dark.

"Slip'n'slide all set up and ready to go!" Tooth announces as the hose is turned on and water's beginning to flow across the rubbery surface. Jamie's the first to get to the head of the slide, placing his goggles over his excited eyes. Baby Tooth standing behind him does a count off, and once she hits three, he runs, launching himself on to his stomach, and the glides gracefully down the slide, letting out a loud, "Woohoooooooo!" until he reaches the end, now drenched in water.

Tooth takes a seat next to me on the lawn chair, watching the two children slide one after another, making the water splash up and threaten to soak the both of us. I wonder, as I watch them, how something that appears as simple as sliding through a blanket of water could be so enjoyable, but then again, I've never slip'n'slid'd before, so what would I know.

"Come on, you two wimps!" Baby Tooth calls over to us as she gets up from her stomach, drops of water falling from her soaked hair. "We need some bigger people to do this so we can make bigger splashes off the sides!"

I look over at Tooth. "Want to?"

"Only if you'll do it."

"I'm going to do it."

"Well, I guess that means I'm gonna do it too."

Both of us get up as Jamie dives on to the slide again, causing a splash of water to fall over the side and on to the grass. I peel my shirt off of my back, and as soon as I toss it on to the lawn chair, I'm suddenly all too aware of my body and how uncomfortable this feels, not having something on to cover my torso. Jamie's been running around for the last couple of minutes though without a shirt on his back, so I guess this troublesome feeling is just me not being used to doing something like this, so I decide to shake it off.

"You can go before me, Jack!" Jamie offers, stepping back from the start of the slide, whipping his wet bangs out from his goggled eyes. As I approach him, looking over at the slide out of the corner of my eye, I feel a pang of uneasiness run through my body. "You okay?" Jamie asks me. "You look a little scaredâ€¦"

I decide to be honest with the boy. "I've never done this before."

Even though those weird shark eyes are blocking out his real eyes, I can see them widen at these words. "\_What\_? You've never slip'n'slide'd before?"

I shake my head.

"Wellâ€¦ you just run at it at full speed, right? And when you're about to reach it, you just, you know, fall on your stomach. It's kinda scary the first time, but once you're going through all that water and get to the end, it's awesome and toooooootally worth it!"

I focus on his last words - awesome and totally worth it - hoping repeating them in my head will give me the courage I need to run forward and slide. As I turn towards the obstacle in front of me though, my eyes land on Tooth, still standing over at the lawn chairs, wearing nothing but a one piece that looks identical to her sisters, only it's blue, green, and yellow, to match the streaks in her hair. She doesn't see me staring at her, the rate of my heart in my chest increasing for some unknown reason; she's too busy pulling her short hair back into a stub of a ponytail, her arms up over her head as she gracefully maneuvers the bright pink hairband around her wrist, down her hand, and around the thick clump of hair. I've seen girls do this before - Emma did it just like Tooth is doing it when she put her long hair back when we were playing outside together - but never has this action looked soâ€¦ soâ€¦ \_elegant\_.

"Jack?" I hear a distant voice ask. "Are you gonna go or what?"

Tooth's eyes meeting with mine is what snaps me back into reality. I look away, mentally punching myself in the face and screaming \_it's not polite to stare, it's not polite to stare, IT'S NOT POLITE TO STARE\_ as I nod my head down at Jamie and begin running at full speed towards the slip'n'slide. I do as Jamie instructed me and fly down on to my stomach right before my feet come in contact with the wet plastic, and the next thing I know, I'm gliding - no - \_flying\_ it seems, water flowing and splashing in all directions around me.

My exit isn't nearly as graceful as my entrance. Not having been told how to stop, I continue to slide on to the wet grass, my body sticking, almost making my lower half flip completely over myself. As I fall back, feeling a sharp pain on my chest, I hear someone let out a loud laugh.

"Laugh all you want, \_Farry\_," I say as I get up, rubbing the spot where the grass had made direct and painful contact with my chest. "Let's see you do better."

"Is that a challenge, \_Overland\_?" she retorts, a cute smirk on her face as she crosses her arms.

"You better believe it was."

"Then challenge accepted."

For the rest of the time we spend at the Bennett's residence, Tooth and I compete to see who's the better slip'n'slider, Baby Tooth and Jamie squeezing their turns in every once and awhile; mostly they just stand off to the side though, allowing the waves of water we create with our sliding to engulf them. Tooth eventually calls a time-out and goes inside to get Sophie up from her nap, bringing her out later in a little, orange swimsuit and matching goggles on her head. We continues to slide until Ms Bennett gets home, and even as she's making dinner inside, we continue to slide, because why go to a boring and lonely home when you're having so much fun right here?

## 10. I Missed You Too

\*\* Wooooah, that was a really long wait, wasn't it?\*\*

Ah man, guys. I'm so, so, soooo sorry for that huge hole there! This chapter was just really weird to write, not only because I fell into a major writer's block halfway through, but also because freaking school decided to start and take up all of my time. Ugh, \_school.\_

Despite all that, thank you all so much for all the reviews and favs and FREAKING FANART! Yeah, I got my first piece of fanart, and let me just tell you how \_excited\_ I was when I got it! It's the recent cover of the story, and was drawn by the lovely user, Maybell's Stories! Thank you so much once again for the great drawing, Maybell! Much appreciated!

Enough about that though. Let's move on to chapter ten! Woo!

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A whole week passes by without me being able to see Jack again, and I begin to wish the grass would grow faster so I'd have an excuse to go over and mow his yard, just in hopes of seeing him peeking through his window again. The grass continues to grow at its own pace however, and I continue to not be able to see one glimpse of that white hair of his.

I quickly start falling back into my original routine before I met Jack: mow the days I have to, then go out to eat with Fish, be ignored by Astrid, go home, shower, and then try to figure out what to do with myself for the rest of the day. I begin reading the summer book I was assigned, but the most pages I'm able to read isn't even enough to get through an entire chapter. I often find my attention drifting towards the window, wondering what it would be like to be biking out there with Jack.

Not even biking, nor the mere idea of biking, can heighten my

spirits. As I mow lawns, I catch myself thinking, When I get home, I'm gonna get my bike and do a few laps around the neighborhood, just to maybe feel a little better. Every time I walk down my driveway and into the garage though, I just stare at my bike sitting on its rack, remembering the blood trickling down Jack's white skin, and I'm suddenly not so eager to go for a ride.

My dad even catches on to this. When he gets home from work, I'm often already there, working on dinner or reading in the living room. Despite the fact that I thought he'd be thrilled to see that I'm not "wasting my time biking" anymore, he seems more worried than anything. I even overhear him and Gobber talking about it one night when they think I've gone off to sleep, Gobber telling him that maybe getting me out of the house will get me out of this funk I'm in.

I'm not really that surprised when my dad tells me he set up a little day trip for us take to the traveling flea market that passes through Bashem, a tiny town even more up north than Berk. I will admit though that I am surprised when he tells me that it's not just us going, but that he invited Bertha and Cami along as well, to which they accepted.

"But isn't Bashem, likeâ€| almost an hour and a half away from here?" I ask him from the living room, the book I was reading laying open in my lap and Toothless pressed up against my side, sleeping. "That's a long time to be trapped in a car with someone like Cami you know."

My dad lets out a heavy laugh from the other room, causing Toothless to stir beside me. "I know it's a long drive, especially with little Cam," I hear him say, "but that's one of the main reasons why you're coming along. To keep her company!"

I know arguing my way out of having to go would be pointless, seeing how I was unsuccessful the last time I tried to wiggle out of my dad's plans. I can't say I particularly mind this time around though. Sure, I'm not the biggest fan when it comes to my dad having a girlfriend, and sure, Cami can be a real exhausting ball of pure energy, but this is a good excuse to get me out of the house. This trip will be good for me, right?

My next day off arrives, and I find myself stuck in the back seat of my dad's car with Bertha up front and Cami bouncing around next to me, trying to get me to have a dragon battle with the two stuffed dragons she brought along. After what feels like nearly an hour of ignore her, I realize it's actually only been twenty minutes, and that's when I finally give in. The only reason why we stop playing is because Cami throws her dragon up front and it lands on top of the dashboard, scaring the living daylights out of my dad. After he yells at us to stop and Bertha turns back and tells Cami to behave, we resort to playing I Spy. That doesn't last long either though. When I keep on picking objects that we passed by a mile or so ago, making it nearly impossible for the poor girl to guess, she attempts to jump across the back seat to tackle me. Her seatbelt restricts her from being successful at her attack though, and when she lets out a loud yelp at the strap snapping up against her, we're then told to play the oldest game in the book: the Quiet Game. One can only guess how long that game went on before Cami cracked.

After what feels like a lifetime, we arrive at the outskirts of

Bashem, rolling into a crowded parking spot located in a large, dirt field, the colorful tents of the flea market only walking distance away.

The four of us attempt to all stay together for the first half an hour or so, but Cami is too eager to be controlled and is running from stall to stall, not taking enough time to really dwell on what's being sold in front of her. I can tell the adults really want to remain at one booth for more than just five seconds at a time, so I volunteer on taking Cami off their hands. My dad seems relieved as Bertha says that that's really kind of me to suggest and that the little girl's all mine. I'm mainly just glad neither of them can tell that the real reason I suggested this was so I didn't have to keep on looking down at their entwined fingers.

After having to hastily keep up with Cami, who somehow manages to get out of my field of vision seven times in just five minutes, I become determined to find a stand that I know she'll stay at long enough for me to catch my breath. As she's going on and on in front of me about some jewelry stall we had just stopped at, I notice out of the corner of my eye the absolute perfect solution to my problem.

"Hey, Cami," I say, grabbing her shoulder before she can run off again. "Guess what I see."

"Whaaat?" she asks, sounding annoyed as she turns her head in the direction I'm pointing. As soon as she her blue eyes grow wide and her mouth drops open though, I know she's seen what I'm talking about.

"Is that-?"

"Sure is. Wanna see-"

"Yesssss!" The tiny girls rockets out in front of me before I can even finish, running at full speed towards the booth coated head to toe with everything dragon related. I give in and allow a smile to slip as I watch her reach the booth, bouncing up and down on her toes so she can see over the counter. She may be too hyperactive for her own good a majority of the time, but man, this little girl is really beginning to grow on me.

I help her search around the stall for something she'd like, and by the time we've scanned through every shelf and table - her destroying a perfectly folded stack of shirts along the way - she's decided on not just one, but three things to buy.

"The snow globe's five dollars," I tell her, taking it from her outstretched hands and studying it. There's a small, green dragon sitting on top of the glass dome, its wings spread out wide as sparkles of all shades of blue fall over each other inside the globe.

"Is that a bargain?" she asks me. "I'll only buy it if it's a bargain."

I simply shrug my shoulders. "Looks like a bargain to me. Lemme see what else you got."

She shows me the other two items in her hands: a coal colored mug

with gray and white designs painted on to it, forming a dragon breathing fire, and a white bumper sticker than says in black, bold letters My other ride is a dragon, a small picture of a dragon with a rider accompanying it.

"Why'd you get a bumper sticker?" I ask her. "You don't have a car."

"It's for when I get one, stupid," she tells me harshly, rolling her eyes. "And the mug's for my hot chocolate. See! The mouth of the dragon is around the top, so when there's hot chocolate in it, it'll look like the smoke's coming out from the dragon's mouth. Isn't that cool?"\_

"But it's the summer. The last thing you want to drink right now is hot chocolate."

She snatches the mug and sticker from my hands, her eye narrowed up at me. "You really know to suck all the fun outta everything, don't'cha, Burp?"

"Hiccup."

"Just tell me how much money I owe the guy!"

Twelve dollars and fifty cents later, Cami and I are back to exploring the many stalls set up for our enjoyment. I'm about to point out a booth that's fairy themed, since I assume if Cami's into dragons, she must also be into fairies, but a familiar face grabs my attention before I can.

"Fish!" I yell over the crowd, hoping he'll hear me over all the noise. Amazingly enough, he does; his head turns after just calling out his name once. When he sees me waving, he turns towards his mom standing beside him, says something to her, and then starts making his way towards me.

"What'cha doing here?" I ask once he approaches. I take note that Cami's run off to a stall just in my eyesight that appears to be selling various items made out of nothing but Coke can pull tabs.

"You know the flea market only comes through, like, twice a year," Fish explains with a laugh. "My mom loves the homemade jewelry people sell here though. Anyways. Are you here with your dad or something?"

"Yeeeeeeeah," I go. "I overheard him and Gob talking the other night about getting me outta the house. I think pretty much forcing me to come to this was their plan."

"It's not really that bad of a plan."

"Hey, I'm not complainin'."

"I know. Oh! I almost forgot to tell you about the news! Did you hear about the-"

"Who are you?"

At the sound of the small voice, Fish stops talking, and the two of us both look down at my side, where the voice had come from. We instantly come face to face with Cami, wearing what I assume was made to be a belt made of pull tabs as a sash over her shoulder. Her eyes are slits, narrowed towards Fish, who's now wearing a worried look on his face as the little girl studies him.

"You're really big," Cami says. She walks up to Fish and cranes her neck back so she can look up at him properly. "Are you part giant? 'Cause that would be really cool."

"Uhâ€¦ I'm not part giant," Fish tells her, not looking as threatened as before. "But you're right. If I wereâ€¦ that'd be really cool."

"What's your name?"

"Fish."

Cami lets out a laugh at this, which makes me feel a little embarrassed. It's only when you meet new people that you realize that names like Fish and Hiccup aren't names people are used to hearing.

"What kinda name is Fish?" Cami asks. "His name's Hiccups, and your name's Fish. Who am I going to meet next? \_Dogsbreath\_?"

"It's a nickname he got when he was a kid, Cami," I explain to her, trying to keep my voice even. Since it's been years since anyone's given Fish or me grief for our nicknames, hearing Cami do just that is honestly beginning to bug me.

"How'd you get it?"

"Wellâ€¦" Fish starts, looking a little flustered now. I want to tell him that he doesn't need to answer, but he's already speaking before I can. "One of our old friends, wellâ€¦ dared me to eat a raw fish when we were kidsâ€¦ and I did."

Cami's face scrunches up as she sticks out her tongue. "Ewww! That's \_grooooooooooss\_!"

Fish just lets out a small laugh and a smile. "Yeah. I know."

"And what about you?" She turns towards me as she speaks. "How'd \_you\_ get a weird name like Hiccup?"

"I thought my name was Burp," I say back.

She responds by sticking her tongue out at me.

Bending down to her level, I place my hand on her shoulder, feeling the rough texture of the pull tab sash under my fingers. "I think it's around lunch time, don't'cha think? How about you go get something for the two of us to eat. I think I saw some food stands right around that corner. Think you can handle that?"

Cami narrows her eyes at me. "Can I get whatever I want?"

"I don't see why not."



"And you \_won't\_ tell my mom?"

"If you don't want me to."

"Deal." She sticks out her small hand, and I shake it. The next thing I know, she's darted off, weaving her way through people towards the food stands, her crazy, blonde hair trailing after her.

As soon as she's completely out of sight, I stand up straight and hear Fish ask me, "Why'd you not want to tell her about how you got your nickname?"

I shot him an annoyed look as I begin moving in the direction Cami had run off in, wanting to keep an eye on her. "You really think she wants to hear \_that\_ depressing story?"

Fish opens his mouth as he follows me, but nothing comes out at first. After a couple of beats though, he lets out an uncertain "Nnnnnnnnoooâ€|?"

"No, I didn't think so either," I say back.

"Who was that girl anyways?" he asks as we round the corner. I see Cami move forward in the line for these humongous drum sticks, her money already in hand as she stares up at the menu. It's then that I realize that I've never told Fish about my dad and Bertha and Cami. Whoopsâ€|

"She's, uhâ€|. she's my dad's girlfriend's daughter," I explain.

"Wooooah, \_what\_?"

"I don't really wanna talk about it, Fish. Not right now anyways."

Fish's expression falls a little at this, and I try not to feel too bad about it. "Oh. Uhâ€| okay. Later then."

"Yeah. Laterâ€| nowâ€| what was the news you were gonna tell me?"

Instantly, Fish's expression lightens up, making me feel slightly better about shutting him down earlier. "Oh! Right! Well, Heather from school is throwing this party, right? And everyone's invited! So I thought we could go or something."

"What's the occasion?"

"Something about it being half way through the summer."

"That doesn't really seem like something people would want to celebrate."

"Yeah, I dunno. I think she just wanted an excuse to throw a party."

"Probably. Where is it?"

"Raven's Point down at the beach. It's gonna be this Saturday night."

"Who all's gonna be there?"

Fish shrugs. "Probably just the usual people. Pretty sure \_Astrid\_ won't skip it."

"Fiiiiiiish. Stooooop."

"Oh, I'm just messin' with ya, Hic."

Cami comes bounding up to us then, carrying two, juicy drum sticks in hand, mounds of napkins wrapped around the base of each as to not grease up her fingers. "I hope you like Viking food, Burp!" she sings as she passes one to me.

The three of us walk around together after that, Cami devouring her lunch in just a couple bites, then finishing mine off when I decide my stomach can only handle so much Viking food.

At looking at my phone and seeing that it's well pass noon, I begin searching through the now dwindling crowd for Bertha and my dad. Fish and Cami are behind me the entire time, going on and on with each other about dragons as I look. Apparently Fish is into that kind of stuff, since I hear him sound very impressed with her new dragon snow globe, and is telling her all about these different types of dragons he knows about and their battle attacks and defenses.

After a couple of minutes of not being successful with my search, I jump up on a bench so I can get a better view. While scanning the crowd, Fish and Cami continuing to enthuse about dragons, I try to find my dad's large, red beard through all the people. In the end though, I happen to find the hair of someone I hadn't been expecting to see.

"Waitâ€¦| \_Jack\_?"

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I find it hard to not want to continue helping Tooth with looking after Sophie, Jamie, and her little sister. Although it doesn't necessarily look like Tooth would have \_that\_ much of a problem without me around, I can't seem to pry myself away from the three enjoyable children.

As the days go on, Jamie shows me even more of his video games, expanding well out of just simple fighting games. Baby Tooth brings over numerous decks of cards to beat me at, and Sophie even introduces me to all her dolls and stuffed animals. The entire time I play along, listening intensively to all the battle moves and rules and names being explained to me, I always manage to hear Tooth, usually sitting off with one of the other kids, giggle and shoot me a smile. For some reason, this makes this funky feeling come into my stomach, but I can't put a name on it quite yet.

Once video games and card games and dolls get tiresome for the kids, Ms Bennett tells us that we can take the three children to this thing called a "flea market" that's apparently made its way through a town close to Berk. Tooth seems excited about Ms Bennett giving us permission to do this, so I assume, whatever this flea market thing is, it must be fun.

We take Tooth's car, strapping in Sophie's pink and yellow polka-dot car seat in the back, between Jamie and Baby Tooth. The one hour and thirty minutes it takes to get there unfolds to be rather entertaining; Tooth puts on some children's music, to which Sophie happily sings along to, clapping her hands together completely out of sync with the music. Baby Tooth eventually gets into it as well, but poor Jamie just complains, saying that "baby music" is stupid and that he's ten and too old for it. Tooth and I get him to at least stop grumbling by joining in with singing with the girls, me having to look at the lyrics on the back of the CD case, since I don't recall any of the songs.

By the time we arrive at the flea market parking grounds, Jamie is the first to bolt out of the car, making Tooth laugh beside me as she turns her car's engine off. She carries Sophie after unstrapping her from the back, and I hold the small hand of Baby Tooth as Jamie leads the way to the entrance of the market that appears to be made up of hundreds of colorful tents.

On entering, my breath is completely taken away.

I don't think I've ever seen so many different objects in one place before. There's vintage coaches of every color and arrangement, strange lawn ornaments in the shape of any animal you can think of, and clothes hand stitched together using various patterns. Old-fashioned wind up clocks, chipped and worn cookie jars, handcrafted jewelry, classic magazines and books. It all seems to be here, ready to be admired and sold.

Tooth asks me if I'm okay as I continue to gawk at my overwhelming surroundings.

"This is a lot of stuff," is all I'm capable of saying, and she just laughs in return.

Baby Tooth gets her sister to buy her this little collection of plaster fairy figures by promising her she'll fold and hang all of Tooth's laundry for a week, to which Tooth happily accepts. Each of the tiny figures are themed by a different flower and color, and supposedly only costing Tooth ten dollars total, which the older, dark haired girl says is totally worth not having to do her laundry for a week.

While searching for something to eat, we happen upon a booth with comic books of every kind towering to the tent's ceiling. As Tooth takes Baby Tooth and Sophie to find some food, Jamie and I scan the shelves, the young boy excitedly explaining the heroes and their sidekicks on the colorful covers of each volume he shows me. He hands the man behind the counter seven dollars for a specific issue he's always wanted, but the man says he can have it for four, since he seems like quite a big fan.

We stop at another stall where an elderly woman is selling mostly

old, stuffed animals that she claims used to be her children's, before they all went off to college. As Tooth and I compliment this woman, for she tell us that most of the plushes we're looking at were indeed crafted by her, Sophie finds great interest in a particular stuffed, white and orange cat. The woman gives it to her for free, saying that our time and kind words are a good enough payment for her.

Later, the five of us all take a seat on a bench positioned off to the side, so that we're out of the way of all the shoppers. Sophie's sitting on Tooth's lap, playing with her new toy, as Jamie and Baby Tooth argue over who'd win in a fight - the superhero in the comic book Jamie had just bought, or an army of Baby Tooth's newly purchased fairy figures. It's then that I begin to hear it; this harmonious sound, making its way into my ears, sounding distant, but also like it's near.

I turn towards Tooth. "What is that?"

She stops, hushing the two older children from their bickering. She squints her pink eyes, looking into the air above me like she'll find the answer somewhere up there. Suddenly, her eyes open wide again and an expression of knowing appears on her face.

"Oh! You mean the music?" she asks brightly.

I give her a questioning look. "\_Music\_"

I suppose asking what this "music" thing is isn't one of my better ideas, because now Tooth's giving me one of those old Hiccup kind of looks, and I can't say I particularly like it. Instead of having to endure her stare, I get up and start heading in the direction of the cordial sound.

"Wait! Jack!" I hear Tooth shout after me. "Where are you going?"

I barely manage to look over my shoulder as I reply with, "I want to find the music!"

Eventually Tooth catches up with me, nudging my way through the heavy crowd. Sophie's in her arms, holding on to her toy like her life depends on it, and Jamie and Baby Tooth following close behind. Tooth doesn't seem dismayed by how I had nearly abandoned her only moments ago - which I'm beginning to feel bad about. I don't know what it was, but at hearing the sound, at hearing this thing called "music", my curiosity just got the best of me; I couldn't continue to just sit there. I have to find it.

After what feels like hours of searching, our little group finally stumbles upon the source of the sound. There's three men, all looking near my father's age - maybe even older - holding strange structures in their hands, two appearing to be made of wood, another ofâ€¦ well, I can't really tell, to be honest. He's holding the narrow instrument up to his thin lips, seeming to be blowing air into one end of it. His fingers jump hastily across its top on what I think are small holes cut out of its surface, somehow changing the sound coming out from the opposite end.

"What \_is\_ that?" I ask in astonishment, pointing to the instrument in the man's hands. Other shoppers begin to stop to observe the men

make their music, tapping their toes and whispering to one another with smiles on their faces.

"That's a flute," Tooth tells me. I half expect her to shoot me a curious look for not knowing this piece of information, but she doesn't, which I'm grateful for.

"And what about that one?" I decide to keep asking, pointing to the man carrying his wooden instrument in between his arms and stomach. One of his meaty hand's fingers are pressed against the long neck that perturbs off of the instruments base, the other waving over what seem to be strings guided up the slender neck.

Tooth lets out a small chuckle. "That's a guitar, of course."

"And that?" I point at the instrument that looks like a "guitar", only it's much smaller and fancier looking, being carried on the smaller man's shoulder, and is played with a strange wooden stick.

"Oh! That's a violin," Tooth exclaims, her words filled with the sound of delight. "I used to play that when I was younger!" She turns quickly to look at me. "Do you play any instruments, Jack?"

I shrug, not being able to think of a more honest way to answer. For all I know, I do have knowledge at one of these instruments; the memory of it could just be lost somewhere inside my mind.

Tooth cocks her head up at me. "How can someone not know if they can play an instrument or not?"

I shrug again. "I'd tell you if I knew."

A crowd begins to form around the three men now, them bobbing up and down to their own beat as they play on. Sophie is asking Tooth if she can put her on her shoulders so she can see better when I feel someone small squeeze in beside me. Looking down at my side, I see Baby Tooth, her heterochromatic eyes locked on me. I reach out and place my hand on the top of her head, ruffling her dark, wavy hair.

"You wanna dance with me, Jack?" she asks, taking my hand into hers.

"But I don't know how to dance."

"That doesn't matter, silly! There's no right or wrong way to dance!"

"You sure?" I ask. "I don't want to embarrass you or anything."

"Yeah, I'm sure!" the little girl giggles, her small fingers squeezing mine, and for just a moment, I swear that the little girl grinning up at me isn't Baby Tooth, but Emma. Their faces are so similar, yet, at the same time, they're not. As I stare down at this little girl though, I can't help but be reminded of my absent, little sister; she's been away at the cursed summer camp for almost two weeks now, and though I've been able to keep myself entertained with Jamie, Sophie, and Baby Tooth, there's no possible way any of them

could possibly replace the spot Emma holds in my heart.

Though, maybe for one day, I can make do with what I have.

Without acknowledging Tooth about our little agreement, Baby Tooth and I step out in front of the crowd that's formed around us. As Baby Tooth grabs ahold of my hands and begins to lead me across the dirt ground, a joyful grin in her step, I notice the man playing the, uhâ€¦ oh, the \_violin\_... send a smile our way.

Since I don't know the first thing about dancing, I can't tell if what I'm doing looks stupid or not. Then again, I also can't tell if what Baby Tooth is doing looks stupid or not either, so I guess that makes me feel better. She has her tiny hands planted in my palms as we move our feet around each other, almost colliding into one another a couple of times, but just laughing it off. She lets out giggles of bliss as I spin her in wide circles, lifting her feet off the ground and tossing her small body into the air above me. She yelps as she flies, and begins to laugh when my hands catch her waist. I hear someone laugh from the crowd, who are even now clapping their hands to the beat of the music, and I look over to see Tooth, Jamie and small Sophie standing at her sides, large smiles on their excited faces as they clap along.

The next thing I know, people begin to rush in on what Baby Tooth and I have started. A young couple is the first to join, the girl looking embarrassed, hiding behind a thick curtain of dark hair as the boy drags her out into the open; she puts on a smile though as he grabs her hands and starts twirling her around, her hair flowing away from her red face and flying in all directions. And elderly couple joins in next, dancing formally, but with some thrill in their step, then two young girls no older than Baby Tooth start spinning the other around until they fall down in a fit of giggles. A handful of other people join too, all wearing such bright smiles on their faces as they forget their worries for just a moment and enjoy the music now dancing around all of us.

Baby Tooth pulls on my hand, and when I lock eyes with her, she signals me towards her older sister, who is still stationed on the sidelines, no more Jamie or Sophie at her sides. A surge of panic begins to run through me, but when I get a glimpse of Sophie's blonde hair running by my side, her older brother tightly holding on to her hand as they jump and spin around everyone else, I relax.

"Go dance with her, Jack!" I hear Baby Tooth yell up at me. "She could use a good dance!"

I decide not to argue, because who am I kidding. We both maneuver ourselves clumsily around all the other dancers and towards Tooth, who notices us coming her way and starts to back up, her hands up in front of her, face glowing red. I let go of Baby Tooth's hands and grab Tooth's, and as she says to me, "Jack, no. Iâ€¦ I can't dance," I reply with, "Yeah, well, neither can I," and we're off, twirling and spinning, hand in hand.

It's much easier to dance with Tooth than it was with her young sister, considering the height difference between the two is extremely significant, and now Tooth here's height works to my advantage. Instead of having to bend my back a bit just to be able to grab Baby Tooth's hands, I can now stand straight, Tooth's hands

folding perfectly into mine. Feeling her skin against mine sends a warm sensation through every bone in my body, and I have a sudden burst of energy to keep moving and to never stop. When I see her shoot me a smile through her messy, dark hair, tangled around her heart-shaped face, I know that I never want to stop.

The music and dancing does come to an end though, and a sudden feeling of emptiness overcomes me as the people begin to disperse, thanking the men behind the music for the great time. Tooth's hands leave mine, and she's saying something to me, something with a smile, but I don't hear it. It's not because of my hollow state though; it's because I hear someone calling my name through all the commotion.

"JACK!"

I look around, Tooth asking me what's wrong when she sees me attention is elsewhere. None of the faces among the dissolving crowd strike me as familiar, but then I hear the voice call out again.

"JACK OVERLAND! OVER HERE, YOU IDIOT!"

Though I don't know who is calling for me or where they are, my head seems to know exactly which direction to turn to find them. And when I do, I can't help but allow my face to crack with a grin so big, it hurts my cheeks.

"Geeeeeez. That took a lot more effort than I thought it would," Hiccup greets me with a laugh, his freckled face suddenly becoming apparent through the crowd. "Might wanna get your ears checked, dude. I called out your name, like, a thousand times and it wasn't until I got right in your face that you heard me. That's pretty pathetic."

I try to think on my toes for a witty return, but I can't seem to be able to find the right words. Let's be honest though. How in the world am I being expected to make up some snide comeback when the boy I haven't physically exchanged words with in the last two weeks - the boy I didn't realize how much I missed until right now - is standing right in front of me.

"Sophie and Jamie both have to go potty, Jack," I hear Tooth interrupt my thoughts. "I'll, uhâ€¦ I'll take them. And I'll take Aly with me too. Be right back." By the way she says it, the slight urgency in her voice, I can tell she's fully aware that Hiccup and me being face to face right now is a pretty big deal. Bless her for catching on to this.

As soon as Tooth's wandered off with the three kids, giving a Hiccup a brief wave and smile before going, Hiccup speaks up by asking, "So, uhâ€¦ wow. Long time, no see, am I right?"

Suddenly, the words I had been unable to find earlier come rushing back to me. "Heh. Yeah... it's been a while since, uhâ€¦ well, you know."

"Two weeks actually," I hear Hiccup mumble, looking down at his sneakers.

"Wow. Two weeks." Now that the amount of time we haven't been able to

see other has been said aloud, it doesn't feel like it's been quite that long; it feels like it's been even longer, to be honest. I look down at the shorter boy, studying the way his auburn hair swoops up at the tips, right above his shoulders, and I realize that I had begun to forget what he looks like. His eyes appear to be even greener than I remember, and the ringing and twisting of his hands, telling me that he's nervous, but trying his best to hide it, is astonishingly apparent.

"Soâ€¦ what have you been up to?" I decide to ask, wanting to keep the conversation flowing. This is the one time in what feels like forever that I've been able to see Hiccup, and the last thing I want to do is make it awkward.

Hiccup just shrugs as he moves his eyes back up at me. "Ah, not much, really. Just mowin' lawns, gettin' summer homework done. You?"

"I've been doing a lot of babysitting actually," I tell him. "Tooth and Iâ€¦ we're looking after the Bennett kids, plus Tooth's little sister. They're all pretty fun."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. You? A babysitter?" He gives me one of his sly smirks, showing off the front gapped teeth that I had also nearly forgotten. "Never thought someone would trust you with the responsibility of looking after children. I'm impressed, Jack."

"You're just mean, that's what you are."

"Oh, don't get vicious with me. We haven't seen each other in, like, forever. Don't ruin this."

Before I can say anything back, we both hear a booming voice like a sledge hammer calling out Hiccup's name. Looking over my friend's shoulder, who's already turned to see who's calling for him, I see a mountain of a man, an auburn beard hanging from his jaw as he appears to be carrying a bag full of what I assume is food. A smaller woman, lengthily light brown hair hanging over her shoulders, stands beside him, waving over towards the two of us. Hiccup's hand rises in return, holding up a finger, telling them he'll be just another minute.

"My dad," Hiccup says as he turns back towards me. "I think we're about to head out."

The words I had been dreading to hear reach my ears, and this spontaneous urge overcomes me, telling me to reach out, take a hold of his arm, and run into the thick crowd, away from his father, away from the people that are trying to keep us apart. I don't know what it is, but the pure thought of not knowing when I'll be able to see Hiccup again sends this wrenching feeling into my chest, and I don't like it. These last two weeks were the hardest two weeks I've had to endure, despite having Tooth and the kids around to keep my company. I just don't believe in myself enough to know that I'll be able to go through anotherâ€¦ well, day without having Hiccup around.

"Is, uhâ€¦ do you thinkâ€¦ you knowâ€¦ we'll be able to see each



other again?" I manage to get out.

At first, he looks uncertain, like he knows that the odds of us seeing each other again are thin, but then something in his eyes change as he realizes something. I ask him what it is, and he says, "So. There's this partyâ€¦ and-"

"A what?"

"A party, Jack. \_Please\_ tell me you know what a party is."

I decide to lie and nod my head, not wanting him to waste time with explanations.

"Well, this girls throwing one this Saturday at Raven Point - which is this place down at the beach - and everyone's invited, which means we could totally all go." I can hear the excitement seeping into his voice with every word he says, and I can't help but sense the same feeling growing inside of me. "Fish and I were thinking of going, and it'd be a good way for the two of us to hang out without having your mom around to keep you a safe distance from me. And you could even meet some new people. Like, people \_your\_ age."

I want to ensure him that I really don't mind having friends that are younger than me, but the voice of his father pierces the air again. Hiccup turns, shouts, "One more second!", then moves back towards me, saying, "What do ya say? You in?"

The thought of my parents - my \_mother\_ more than anyone - finding out that I'm going to this "party" thing makes me stop and question what I'm getting myself into. On one hand, I would feel awful about breaking my mother's rules, when all she's really trying to do is keep my safe. On the other hand though, because of all her said rules, I haven't been able to see the face of my best friend. At realizing this, I suddenly don't feel bad about asking, "When does it start?"

A brilliant smile breaks across Hiccup's face as he fills me in with details. "Ten, I'm assuming. That's when they usually start anyways."

"That's kind of lateâ€¦"

"Not really. Will it be hard to get outta your house?"

"Iâ€¦ don't think so. My parents usually go off to bed around that time."

"Good. Fish and I'll be at your place to get you at ten fifteen-ish then. Give you some time to get outta the house without your parents catching you."

"Wait, wait, wait. How exactly am I supposed to get out of my house without them knowing?"

"You just sneak out. It's really not that hard to do."

"Is that what you're going to do?"

"Pfft, \_duh\_."

"HICCUP!"

Hiccup turns back towards his father, still standing in the same place as before, looking more impatient this time around. Hiccup lets out a groan and shouts back, "Justâ€¦! UGH! ONE MORE SECOND PLEASE!" Turning quickly back towards me, he gives me this urgent look, like he needs me to make up my mind right now or there's no way this is going to be able to work.

It only takes me a moment to answer the question in his eyes.

"Ten fifteen you said?"

He lets out a smile as he begins to turn in the direction of where his father is waiting for him. "Ten fifteen. I'll see you then, alright?"

I nod. "Yeah. I'll see you then."

"Oh. And wear some jeans and a jacket too. It gets cold here at night."

"Got it."

He's walking off, becoming more and more out of range with every step he takes, and I don't know what makes me do it, but I call out his name. He turns back towards me without missing a beat, this look on his face that tells me I have his undivided attention. At seeing this - at realizing that he actually \_wants\_ to hear what I have to say - my earlier fear of him maybe not even liking me from weeks ago evaporates from my mind completely. If he didn't like me, he wouldn't have run through the crowd, yelling my name, just to get my attention. If he didn't like me, he wouldn't have invited me to this party, taking the extra steps to see that I would be able to go. If he didn't like me, he wouldn't have turned back, his eyes telling me thatâ€¦ wellâ€¦ he cares what I have to say.

I just say it. I know it must sound lame to anyone that overhears me while walking by, but I really couldn't care less.

"I missed you," I tell him.

He doesn't say anything back right away; just appears to be taking in what I've said. There's no expression on his face, and I become petrified, afraid that I may have misinterpreted this entire situation between us and said the wrong thing entirely. He proves me wrong though.

"Yeah," he says with a smile. "I missed you too."

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Despite being happy about being able to see and actually \_made plans\_ with Jack, the drive on the way back home is tense, but not because I want to it to be. Cami won't look at me, not even out of the corner

of her eye, and I feel like I should say something, but I don't know what. There's only so many things you can say to someone after witnessing something like what I saw.

Bertha had told me that Cami was going to the bathroom after I had rejoined her and my dad, both ready to leave, like I had guessed. I said I would go and wait for Cami to finish her business, to ensure that she wouldn't get lost coming back. Weaving through booths and people, the strong stench of human feces entered my nose, and I knew I had arrived at the right place. I was about to turn a corner leading to the strip of land holding the toilets when I heard it - young children talking to one another, only the words being said didn't sound very kind. They had been mocking, making fun of someone, and I had stopped in my tracks when I heard the small voice of Cami appear within them.

"Give that back, Gustav!" she yelled as I heard laughs fill the air. "I paid five dollars for that! It came right out of my allowance!"

"Oh boo hoo," I heard a boy's voice mock. "Little Cami Bog's too short to reach her precious cup. Whatever shall she do to get it back?" More laughs filled the air as I heard Cami attempt to jump from the ground to reach the mug she had only purchased earlier. By the sound of the continued snickers, I knew she hadn't been able to reach it.

"This isn't funny, guys!" Cami cried, sounding like she was on the verge of tears.

"What are you talking about? This is \_hilarious!\_"

That's when I had had enough. The whole thing, everything about it, sounded so familiar, and I hated it. I couldn't just stand there and listen to Cami go through something like that - like something \_I\_ had had to go through when I was her age. No one had been around to help me out when Lout and the other kids made fun of me, so, by gods, I was going to be there for her.

I didn't move fast enough though, because as soon as I turned the corner, I heard glass shatter. Cami let out a sharp gasp as my eyes locked on the remaining gray and white pieces of the dragon mug, scattered all over the dirt ground around Cami's and this Gustav kid's feet.

"Hey!" I shouted without thinking, making my way over towards the cluster of kids. The three bullies, all much bigger than Cami, jumped at my voice, their eyes growing wide when they saw me. "What do you think you're doing, messing with her like that?"

Gustav - their leader, I assume - looked paralyzed where he stood, his dark eyes darting every which way, like he was looking for a good alibi. "Uhâ€ w-weâ€ we were justâ€ uhâ€ weâ€"

"Save it, kid," I said harshly down to him. "I saw what happened. Now, how would \_you\_ feel if I did something like that to you, huh? I'm a lot bigger than you, so it that seems 'bout fair, don't'cha think?"

"Hiccup-" I heard Cami start, but a girl with short, sandpaper

colored hair spoke first.

"We were just playing aroundâ€|"

"Yeah, well it wasn't very funny, now was it? She paid good money for that mug, and now it's ruined because you guys thought it'd hilarious to pick on her and break it." I looked down at the three older kids, all staring at their feet, looking more like they were regretful that they gotten caught than regretful about what they had done. At noticing that Gustav had the same eye color and hair shade as Lout, I suddenly wanted to get these kids out of my sight.

"You're lucky I don't tell your parents about this," I told them firmly, letting them know that I wasn't kidding. "Now scram, all of you."

None of them missed the opportunity to run for it, not even bothering to look back before disappearing into the maze of stalls. Once they were out of sight, I bent down next to Cami and reached for one of the shattered mug pieces, but she unexpectedly whacked my hand away before I could grab it. Shooting her a look, she returned it with a bitter glare I hadn't been expecting.

"I didn't need your help," she spat at me, snatching up the last piece of mug and throwing it into her backpack.

"Oh, sure you didn't," I said back, rolling my eyes as I got up from the ground. "It wasn't like they were going to leave you alone after smashing your cup or anything. If I hadn't come in, they probably would've also gotten a hold of your snow globe and did the same to it."

Cami quickly stood up straight, swinging her backpack over her shoulder, and gave me another death glare. "I can take care of myself, Hiccup! Now leave me alone!" I noticed the tears building up on the rim of her eyes, and before I could apologize or say anything, she was off, in the direction that I had arrived from.

Fast forward a good hour, and here we are now, sitting in the back of my dad's car, not looking at each other. Bertha had asked how our day had been, and I did most of the talking, since apparently Cami doesn't want to talk to anyone, not just me. This makes me feel a little better, but then again, not really.

Things get even worse, however, when Bertha asks if I'd be willing to start actually babysitting Cami during the days I don't have to mow, since taking her daughter to work every day is beginning to take a toll on her and her fellow employees. I don't really have any choice but to accept this offer, especially with my dad's eyes burning into me from the rearview mirror. Cami doesn't seem pleased by the news by the way she crosses her arms, sinking more into her seat, and letting out a mean "hmph". Can't say that particularly made me feel any better.

Once we arrive back at my place, Bertha suggests that Cami and I stay outside and play while she and my dad get dinner ready. I try making eye contact with Cami when her mom mentions this, but she seems determined to not let me through.

We end up just sitting out on the stone steps of my front porch, her

on one side leaning against the exterior of the house, me on the other leaning against the column. My dad let Toothless out before closing the door, so the little furball's sitting in my lap, looking up and begging for a back rub, when all I can think about is the little, hurt girl sitting only five feet away, her turquoise backpack resting against her chest, being squeezed by her small arms.

Gods, this is so stupid...

"Cami, I'm sorry," I say taking a deep breath of courage. "I didn't know that you-"

"I'm not talking to you," she throws at me, still not looking in my direction.

I look down at Toothless, and he already has his green eyes on me, giving me this look like he's telling me I should know better than to think it would be that easy to win this girl back. I guess the cat's got a point. I'm going to have to approach this situation from another angle.

"Heyâ€¦ do you like bikes?" I decide to ask

Cami doesn't answer; just continues to look anywhere but at me.

I ignore her not answer and go on. "Because I have this bike in the garage that's really, really fast and stuff. I've been workin' on it for a long time, so it's really cool."

Still nothing.

"I can let you see it, if you want."

There we go! I see her head turn only a bit to look at me, her blue eyes becoming visible. She doesn't stop looking at me, like she's silently asking me to go on, so I do.

"I race it a lot," I tell her, then realize what I'm saying. "Well, I want to race it a lot. I haven't gotten around to doing it yet though."

"Why?"

Okay, this is good. I guess now that she's talking to me again, I can grow off of this. Just can't say the wrong thing...

"Wellâ€¦ the other kids are kinda weird about me racing against them," I tell her, reaching out and beginning to stroke Toothless between his ears. He closes his eyes, lying down in my lap, now resting his soft head on my forearm. "I mean, they kinda always have been."

"Why?"

I shrug. "I was small when I was growing up, y'know. I mean, I still am for my age, but it was even worse when I was, like, around your age. They would all pick on me for tiny and not being able to do anything right. That's actually how I got my name."

"â€|really?"

"Yeah. I was looked at as the hiccup of the group. You know, the runt of the litter or something."

"So that's why you go by Hiccup?"

"Yeah. That's about it."

"Why would you go by a nickname that was made to make fun of you though?"

I shrug again. "I dunno. It just kinda stuck."

Cami doesn't say anything for a moment, just looks away. I can tell she's thinking deeply over what I've told her though, so I allow her some time to herself. Toothless' purring replaces the silence, much to my relief, sounding like a small engine being revved from my lap.

"Why don't they race you though?" Cami asks after a moment.

"I dunno. I think it's because they don't take me seriously, or they don't think I'll be nearly as good as them, so they don't want to waste their time. I don't really like dwelling on it, y'know? Makes me feelâ€| wellâ€|"

"Bad?"

Looking over at the small girl, I notice that she's already looking back at me with an expression on that tells me everything; I look at her face and I see the same face that I was forced to look at every day in the mirror while growing up. I suddenly want to reach out and wrap her into a bear hug, but I don't know if that'd be pushing the boundaries, so I stay in my place.

"Yeah. It makes me feel bad."

"â€| I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

She quickly looks away and down at her feet, being held in a pair of hot pink flip-flops. I hear her remove her backpack from her lap and place it on the porch beside her, now curling her legs in to her chest, wrapping her arms around them like she had been doing with her backpack earlier.

"Kids make fun of me sometimes too," I hear her say in a quiet voice.

I don't really know what to say. The first thing that comes to my mind is pretty sarcastic, and I know that's the last kind of thing I want to say right now with Cami being all sensitive and quiet. I keep my mouth shut instead and hope she decides to continue.

"They think I'm weirdâ€| 'cause I like dragons so much. And 'cause I'm really hyper, which I think is really stupid. I mean, I can't help being hyper!"

"Kinda like how I couldn't help being small," I say.

"Yeah! Like that!"

"You know what I think about all those kids that make fun of you?"

"What?"

"I think they can all go to Niflheim."

Cami, bless her little soul, breaks into a fit of giggles at me saying this, and that gets me to laughing as well. Toothless jumps out of my lap at this, being disturbed and probably annoyed by the sudden movement. He wanders off into the front yard, his nose to the ground as he explores.

"So what if they think you're weird," I tell her. "You're you and that's all that matters, right? You can't change who you are, and if you doâ€¦ well, then you're just stupid."

Cami nods her head in agreement, a smile now on her freckled face. "Yeah! Who needs those lame brains anyways, right? They don't know me!"

"Yeah! Who needs 'em!"

We continue to sit there on the porch, just laughing at the mere thought of all those kids that have picked on us through the years not even being worth our time. I'll admit, but this whole thing feels great, being able to talk about all this. After so much time, people pretty much stopped listening to me complain about always being the target for bullying. Teachers would turn a blind eye, because they all knew that there was just no stopping kids like Lout from picking on kids like me, and my dad even just threw up his hands and accepted the fact that I was going to be the school laughing stalk. Being able to sit here though with a girl who just gets it - that understands to the dot what I had to and am still going through - wellâ€¦ that feels really, really nice.

"Hey, you still have the mug in your backpack?" I ask Cami, and when she nods her head, I shoot her a smile and say, "Wanna go inside and fix it before dinner's ready? If we're fast enough, maybe you could even make some of that hot chocolate you were telling me about before we eat."

She looks genuinely stunned to hear me say this, but an enormous grin eventually spreads across her face as she quickly begins nodding her head so fast, I'm surprised she didn't black out at least a little. She jumps up from the stairs as I call for Toothless, listening to her start to sing a little song she's probably making up right on spot about how excited she is about making hot chocolate. Toothless jumps into my arms, and as we walk inside, I can't help but be amazed at how well that played out.

## 11. You Don't Mess Everything Up

\*\*\*cries a little\* I'm so sorry, guys. Please forgive me.\*\*

My defense for why this update took me so long is that I got terribly sick last week, making it impossible for me to get anything done. And this chapter, as you will probably notice while reading it, has a somewhat angsty tone to it, so it took a lot of energy to get out. It's here though! It's here and ready to be read!

There's a new few characters introduced as well, but don't expect them to stick around. I'm mainly just adding them for fanservice and to add some conflict for the next couple of chapters. Normally I would want to give them bigger parts, but I'm already working with so many characters as it is, and this story is about half way over anyways, so introducing anymore major characters doesn't seem very smart to me.

Thanks for reading and the lovely reviews, everyone! I love you all!

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Sneaking out of my house proves to be a lot simpler than I had anticipated. My parents go to bed exactly when I had guessed they would, me pretending to go upstairs to call it a night as well. As soon as my illuminate clock shines a red ten fifteen and I can hear the deep snore of my father from down the hall, I quietly slip on the suggested pair of jeans and my navy blue hoodie. Minus the squeaky top stairs, me nearly losing my footing on the bottom step, and the heavy crack of the deadbolt locking behind me, I manage to make it out of the house without being noticed.

The algid night air hits me like a battling ram as soon as I l turn away from the door, completely catching me off guard when I feel a nipping breeze brush against my face. Suddenly becoming very aware of my bare hands and the hole in the knee of my jeans, I almost head back into the guaranteed warmth of my house. It's a pair of bright lights down the street that stop me though. After I give my eyes a second to adjust to the darkness, I'm able to make out the shape of a small car, the two lights becoming obvious headlights. It must be Fish and Hiccup waiting for me; who else could it be at this time of night anyways?

I begin to jog down the dirt street towards them, shoving my hands into my pockets because of the sudden rush of chilly air around me. Dang. I know Hiccup had said that it'd be cold out tonight, but I would never have imagined it would be this cold.

Once I'm able to see through the windshield of the car, I notice the two boys sitting inside motioning me over towards the back doors. Following their instruction, I pull on the crisp door handle and slide inside, making sure to make as minimal noise possible as I shut the door.

Hiccup turns himself to face me from the passenger's seat. "Cold, huh?"

I remove my hands from my pockets, mainly because of the dramatic change of temperature; the smaller heaters on the ceiling the car



seem more like a blessing than anything. "No. Not  
\_really.\_"

"Liar."

The drive to this place called Raven Point doesn't take necessarily long; quite honestly, I don't get to check out a lot of the scenery passing us by considering, one, it's dark outside, and two, I'm distracted. For the entirety of the ride, Fish has this thing he refers to as "the radio" on, which produces music very different from the type I heard while at the flea market. Him and Hiccup sing along to a few rather catchy songs, and I have a hard time not erupting with laughter at their incapability of singing on pitch. Me telling them this when they ask about my outbursts only gets Hiccup going even more, him practically screaming the lyrics at the top of his lungs, his voice squeaking and cracking at all the wrong places. He eventually stops though - despite my laughing egging him on - when Fish directs us off the main road and on to a dirt road.

After turning down the music and a moment of driving in near darkness, I notice several other cars parked out in the open field before us, scattered in no organized fashion. Some kids around my age and younger stand by their cars, making conversation with their friends, while others walk towards the ledge of what appears to be a cliff, disappearing once they approach a ramp and descend down it.

I hear a loud click from Hiccup's corner of the car, and he whips around to face me, a large grin on his freckled face. "Ready to go to your first part-ah?"

"\_Wait.\_ Jack's never been to a party before?" Fish asks as he twists and yanks his keys from the little slot they were inserted in.

"Noooooo sir, he hasn't." I hear Hiccup's door open, and as he steps out, he add on, "Jack here's super sheltered I've discovered. He's practically a \_virgin\_ when it comes to living life."

I want to ask what a "virgin" is, but I don't get the chance since Fish lets out a booming laugh, then turns back towards me and says, "Well, then this is gonna be a fun night for you, buddy!"

After Fish double checks that he's locked his car, the three of us follow suit with the other kids also attending the party. The ramp connected to the ledge does go down to the beach below, like I had assumed. We climb down the wooden boards, all our hands being shoved into our jacket's pockets as we get further and further down towards the lapping water.

I want to say a lot of people show up for this gathering, but I don't necessarily know how much people would be qualified as "a lot". They all appear to be divided up into several groups though; cliques of girls, all wearing oversized sweaters and furred boots, mainly stand off by a small fire, plastic cups and mugs in their hands as they all idly chat with one another; bands of boys collect near where the drinks are found, laughing and shoving each other around in a friendly kind of way, a few wearing coats that state BERK HIGH proudly on their chests.

As we enter the scene, the solid, rock ground bleeds into this

strange substance I think is called "sand". I get the urge to take my sneakers off so I can feel the foreign texture in between my toes, but I decide against it, assuming that an action like that would be deemed inappropriate.

"Jaaaaaaaaack? You still with us, buddy?"

Hiccup's voice drags me back into reality, the thick collar to his heavy, army green jacket pulled up to block his face from the wind. I notice Fish wandering off, probably to get some us drinks, like he was saying he would do when we were walking down here.

"This must be a lot for you to take in, huh?" Hiccup asks me with a smirk, and I nod sheepishly down at the sand at my feet. "Hey, don't feel bad about it, dude. It makes sense. I mean, considering your situation and all. But yeah. Uhhâ€¦ Berk High's kinda on the smaller side, so this is probablyyyyâ€¦ eiiighâ€¦ maybe half the sophomore class, and maybe a quarter of both the juniors and seniors."

"What about the, uhâ€¦ the first one?" I ask.

"You mean the freshman?"

"Yeah. The freshman."

Hiccup laughs. "No one invites the freshman to these kinda things."

"Oh. Why?"

"Because no one likes them, duh."

"Why's that?"

"It's justâ€¦ no one does, y'know. It's, like, this universal agreement between the three older grades. We all just hate the freshman."

"Yeah, but \_why\_?"

He places his hand on my shoulder, letting out a dramatic sigh. "You may not understand the hierarchy of high school right now, my friend, but I can guarantee you that one day you will. One day."

Fish returns then with three plastic cups in hand, saying he'll make sure to not drink too much tonight so we can all get home safely. I want to ask what he means by this and how this liquid could possibly jeopardize our journey back home, but the two other boys have already gone to taking long swigs from the cups. Fish lets out a satisfying sigh once he comes up for air, and Hiccup squeezes his eyes shut, seeming to be having a hard time getting the beverage down.

"You okay?" I ask him with a curious laugh.

He shots me a thumbs up with his unoccupied hand. "Never better. The first sip's always the hardest to get down, am I right?"

Fish raises his cup. "Amen to that. But it's always worth it."

"Go on," Hiccup eggs me on once he's restored himself. "Take a sip."

You may like it."

Looking down at the substance in my hands, I can't tell whether I really do want to try it or not. The shade of the fluid is this unappetizing yellow-orange hue, small bubbles forming from under the foamy surface and dotting the brims of the cup. The aroma coming from it is sour, making the inside of my nostrils burn.

"Iâ€¦ I don't know, Hiccupâ€¦" I manage to stumble out, still observing the drink in hand. "It doesn't look very good."

"You don't have to finish it or anything if you don't like it," Hiccup assures me with a simple shrug, taking a small sip from his cup. This time his expression doesn't change as the drink goes down effortlessly. "Just try it, you know. To say you did."

I sigh, looking down at the yellow liquid, and hear Hiccup chuckle under his breath.

Wellâ€¦ here goes nothing.

As soon as the drink crawls down my throat, a growing bitterness latches on to my tongue and doesn't let go. I feel a fizzy sensation linger on my lips as I lower the cup, clasp my eyes shut like Hiccup had as I fight the sour taste that's dancing around inside of my mouth and making my eyes feel all wonky. The horrid aftertaste remains well after I've managed to swallow, but it's actually quite bearable; not to mention the fact that the drink has seemed to have heated my insides up considerably.

"Judging by your abhorred expressions, I think I can assume you didn't like it?" Hiccup asks me once I manage to open my eyes again. When I nod in agreement, licking my lips in attempt to rid my tongue of the awful taste, the two boys both start to laugh.

"Don't worry about it," Fish tells me once I apologize to the two, handing my drink to him as to get rid of it. "It's a required taste."

We find a nice spot on a patch of rocks after what Hiccup tells me is one of my first "high school experiences", joking with one another about trivial things and attempting to keep ourselves warm. As the minute hand on my watch moves from number to number, I notice that the temperature seems to be dropping, but I find myself not minding. The coldness, I discover, is actually quite nice.

Once their drinks run out, we all wander back over towards this metal, barrel looking thing that I assume contains the strange liquid from before, a handful of kids already crowding around it, plastic cups in hand. Some of them are laughing at what appears to be nothing, hanging from their friend's shoulders for support, and others are talking a lot louder than they really need to be. Hiccup refills the drinks as Fish introduces me to the two familiar blonde twins, who tell me their names are Ruff and Tee; I forget which one said which name, since the names in themselves are too similar to tell apart, just like their owners. I'm surprised to see that Lout's nowhere in sight, since every time I see this set of twins, he always appears to be around. Though, without him here, I do notice that they have a softer, kinder feeling to their faces, rather than their rough, narrowed eyed sneers.

It's mainly Fish and the twins that exchange words, Hiccup chiming in every once and awhile. I notice that the smaller boy looks more excluded than he usually does, like he's merely standing on the sidelines of this conversation, a little like me. He doesn't seem to be able to make direct eye contact with any of them - minus maybe Fish - and he's fidgety, constantly moving his drink from one hand to the other, taking sips from it whenever he can't find anything better to do. These actions remind me of when we first met, how inept and awkward he was as he attempted to help me get down from that tree and walked me home afterwards. Thinking about that day brings a smile to my face and a warm feeling to my stomach, kind of like that drink earlier. It's weird thinking about that, considering everything we've been through since that day: the day I "wrecked" Lout's bike, the weeks of training and getting to know each other, the dreadful day of the race that I barely even recall, and the endless weeks I had to endure without being allowed in his company. Now that I really think about all those events in order like that, I've actually only known Hiccup for about four-ish weeks.

Wow. It feels like it's been much, much longer than just that.

Hiccup's eyes suddenly lock on mine, and I'll admit that I'm a little embarrassed to have been thinking such intimate thoughts about him while he's standing right there. That uneasiness washes away though when he jerks his head to tell me to look over my shoulder, saying, "I think someone's lookin' for ya, Jack."

I turn around and, sure enough, there's Tooth, all bundled up in a multicolored plaid jacket with a lot of buttons and ties. She seems to be accompanied by three boys though, two of them like giants in comparison to little, old her, and the other short and kind of on the pudgy side. Tooth catches me looking her way, her dark face lighting up as she shots her hand into the air and begins to wave.

I wave back, and as I'm about to ask Hiccup if it's okay if I can go off with her for a while, I hear him say, as if he had been reading my mind, "Go hang out with her. We can catch up later, alright?"

"Just don't leave without me," I tell him. "I don't want to walk home."

Hiccup laughs. "I don't think we have a choice. You're probably going to be the only fully sober person here by the time this thing's over."

Not bothering to question him on what exactly the word "sober" means, I go off to join Tooth and her posse, still sending me that bright smile of hers that manages to warm me up, despite the cold.

"Hey there, Miss Tooth Fairy," is how I greet her, tipping my head in her direction. "Collect any interesting teeth lately?"

The small girl shakes her head as she lets out a laugh, moving a loose strand of her dark hair out of her eyes. "No, I haven't actually, thanks for asking. But I do, however, have some people I'd like you to meet." She turns towards the three boys standing behind her, moving over and placing her hand on my arm, sending an

unexpected chill to run up my spine. "Guys. This is Jack. That new boy to town that I've told you about." She then turns back towards me, her hand still where she left it. "Jack, these are some of my friends from school. This is Nikolay. He's a foreign exchange student from Russia!"

Standing in front of me has got to be the largest human being I've ever laid eyes on. The dark haired and stunning blue-eyed boy must stand a good foot taller than my own \_father\_, and has this guy actually somehow managed to grow a legitimate \_beard?\_

"Ah! Jack! Just call me Nik!" the broad teen with an odd, foreign accent that I guess is Russian greets me. He reaches out, taking a firm grasp of my hand - which are \_ginormous\_ \_compared to mine - and begins to shake it so forcefully that I nearly get knocked off balance. "We have heard so much about you from little Ana here! Nice to finally be meeting you!"

"And this is Sandy," Tooth goes on once Nik releases me from his death grip. "He's, uhâ€¦ he's a mute, so he doesn't talk very much." Looking down next to Nik, I see a short, round boy with spiky blonde hair shooting out in all directions, small eyes the same color and shape as lemons. He moves his chubby hands around in some wild gestures, causing me to raise my eyebrows in curiosity, and once he's finished, Tooth tells me, "He said 'It's nice to meet you, Jack'." I shot the little man a grin, impressed to see that, despite his obvious disadvantage, he's found a way to communicate with his friends. He returns it with a toothy smile and a cheerful thumbs up.

"And, last but not least," Tooth says, moving towards the last of the three boys and resting her hand gently against his thick arm. "This is East."

This East guy looks a lot more rugged and worn standing next to the other two boys, with his gruff stubble, tattooed arms, and short, silver hair. I'm not surprised to hear yet another foreign accent - either some denomination of British or Australian, I can't tell - when he says to me, "So \_you're\_ this Jack bloke we've heard so much about, eh?" For some reason, by the sour tone in his voice and the unfriendly glare he's sending my way, I get the odd feeling that, for whatever reason, East doesn't really like me. I'm a little taken aback by this, considering this is the first time I've even \_seen\_ the guy, so how could he possibly not like me already?

I decide to play it cool though, mostly for Tooth's sake. "You bet I am," I confirm, giving him a grin in response to his glare.

"Soâ€¦ what you're sayin' then is that \_you're\_ the bloke that Ana almost ran over with her car a few weeks ago, hm?" I can tell by the way he says it that he doesn't find that whole situation to be rather humorous, which I don't blame him for, not really. I don't let his sour attitude ruin my mood though.

"Oh yeah, that's me!" I go with a laugh. "The infamous Jack! Causing trouble everywhere I go!"

East just narrows his bright, green eyes at me again as Tooth's face turns bright pink to match hers. I begin to feel the apparent tension I've suddenly caused, but Nik, however, eases it by bursting out

laughing, his vociferous howl making the four of us jump in our spots. He moves over towards me, wrapping his burly arm around my shoulder, and says, "Ah, Ana! I like this one. He is quite funny!"

Tooth relaxes some, letting out a small laugh as Sandy shakes his head, a smile on his bright face. "I knew, out of all of you, you would like him the most, Nik," she confesses. East doesn't seem to let up though, which intrigues me; what could this guy possibly have against me? Well, despite the fact that his friend almost ran me over with her car, but hey, that's way in the past, right? And it's not like either of us or her car were seriously damaged anyways, so why hold a grudge?

Nik says something about being thirsty, encouraging East to join him and Sandy on the quest to get drinks. East doesn't look very pleased with this notion - I can tell mainly by the way he moves closer to Tooth as the idea is suggested, like he doesn't plan on leaving her side - but the mountain of a man that's Nik wraps his arm around East's shoulders and guides him away from Tooth and me, going on loudly about maybe meeting some cute girls over at what he calls a "keg". As they go, I see East turn his head back several times in our direction, as to make sure we haven't run off.

"Sorry about them," Tooth apologizes, looking at the sand at her feet and playing with the cuffs of her jacket. "They're all kindaâ€¦ wellâ€¦ they're not necessarily that good with people, you know."

"Tooth, I don't know what you're talking about," I tell her happily, hoping to restore some of her confidence in her friends. "Did you see how Nik just embraced me? I don't think anyone I've just met has ever done something like that before! I mean, he's easily got to be one of the friendliest guys I've met here. And that Sandy seems nice enough as well. That, uhâ€¦ that big East guy thoughâ€¦ he seems a littleâ€¦ uhâ€¦"

Tooth lets out a small chuckle. "Protective?"

"Yeeeeeah. Specifically towards you."

"We've been friends since he moved here in the sixth grade from Australia," she tells me. "He doesn't have any siblings, and all of his other friends are guys, so I gueeeess he kind of warmed up to me, being the only girl friend he has. It's nice though, knowing someone tough like him has my back. He can definitely scare away the mean kids at school when they pick on me, that's for sure!"

"People pick on you?" I ask, a little surprised to hear this. Tooth seems normal enough; well, when you minus the whole tooth necklace and colorful highlights trailing through her hair, I mean. I don't understand how someone could possibly want to make fun of someone as sweet and amiable as Tooth here.

The small girl simply shrugs, trying to appear like it's really no big deal, but I can tell it bothers her. I decide to drop it though, since I remember the time I asked Hiccup about why he was picked on and how he instantly shot me down. Instead, I turn myself towards where the three friends left to, and despite the fact that East now has a plastic cup in hand, I can tell he's having a hard time not

peering over in our direction. Nik appears to be trying to get his focus off of us and on to the drinks and people around them, but it also doesn't appear to be working that well.

"I don't really think East likes me," I say, mainly to myself.

"Jack!" Tooth cries, actually sounding somewhat hurt. "How can you say that? You only \_just\_ met him!"

I shrug. "Just a hunch."

"Well, if it means anythingâ€¦ I like you."

Hearing these words send a hot feeling to shot through me, quickly reaching my face and making my insides heat up. I try my best to ignore it, and luckily for me, it's pretty dark out, so Tooth can't see the red I feel flooding into my cheeks.

"Thanks," I say back, trying to keep my cool. "Iâ€¦ like you tooâ€¦ if it means anything."

She giggles. "Thanks, Jack."

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I've had a lot of headaches in my life, but this one. Man, this one's got to be one of the \_worst\_.

It only takes about two cups and a half of beer to get me feeling like a useless sack of potatoes, and that's honestly not that much of a surprise. Normally, I don't drink - normally, I don't even \_go\_ to these parties - so naturally my body wasn't ready to take in all that alcohol. I'm definitely feeling it now though; ah man, am I feeling it.

Giving Fish the remains of my unfinished drink, I tell him that I'm going back to his car to lay down for a bit. He hands his keys over to me without question, too busy flirting hardcore with Ruff, who's actually been laughing at all his stupid jokes so far. At least him and Jack, who's gone off with Tooth and her friends, are having a good time.

I maneuver my way up the ramp leading to the overlook, passing by other kids as they enter Raven Point. Most just ignore me, but some that I recognize from my grade send me weird looks, like they can't believe I actually decided to show up. I don't blame them though. Like I said, I normally don't go to these kinds of things.

Which leads to the question: why \_did\_ I agree to go in the first place?

I don't know what it is, but the line between point A and point B doesn't seem as clear to me as it used to be. Maybe it's just the beer settling in, but maybe it's just something going on with me mentally - when I'm not tipsy as hell, I mean. Ever since Jack got

here, things have been getting all messed up, and I can't say I particularly like it. Not that this has anything to do with Jack, because it totally doesn't. More of a coincidence than anything.

First there's Astrid, and that's just an issue that I can't think of a solution to. I've tried countless times since the day of Jack and Lout's race to talk to her, to tell her that her silent treatment isn't really making me feel worse about what I did, because I already feel awful about it to begin with. Every time I open my mouth in her general direction when Fish and I are at The Ring, she always finds something to say first or somewhere else to be. Fish has told me to just let it go; let her start talking to me when she feels like it, and I've decided to take that route. Not that I like it. Even though the feisty blonde always seemed to be out to get me on everything I did, I can honestly say that I'd rather have her getting all upset and in my face than have her just ignoring me altogether.

Then there's the whole Bertha and Cami situation, and just thinking about it just makes my head hurt even worse. With meeting Bertha x-amount of weeks ago and figuring out her statues in my dad's love life, I had been determined to not let her in. I thought there would be no physical way that I would let a potential mother figure into my life again - not after the hell I had to endure seven years ago - but man, this woman is proving me wrong. With every time I see her, every time I'm forced to sit down and talk, I find that I'm growing more and more fond of her. She just gives off this pleasant vibe that engulfs the entire room and all those in it, and while it makes me happy to see that my dad's found such a likeable woman, it also makes me incredible sick. Not to mention little Cami. Like her mother, I had been determined to not let her in, but she head-butted her way full force through my barriers anyway. Now I'm being expected to babysit for the girl, and I hate to admit this, but I'm actually looking forward to it.

The gleam from the artificial lights down at the beach begin to fade once I reach the top of the cliff, along with the crowd of fellow party goers. It's not as cold up here as it was down there, and for this, I am grateful. No matter how long you live in Berk, you never really do get used to the coldness.

As standing up straight begins to grow more and more difficult, I mentally curse Fish for parking so far away. Luckily for me, by the time my vision begins to get all wonky and my legs begin to buckle, I've arrived at the driver's door, pulling out the keys from my jacket pocket as my forehead continues to throb. It takes me a moment to find the key slot, since I've closed my eyes to try to ward away the headache, but I somehow manage it after what seems like hours of trying. I crawl in, slamming the door behind me, and just sit there behind the wheel, my eyes squeezed shut. The air in here is just as cold as it was out there, so once I summon up enough strength, I reach out and turn the key in the ignition. The car is instantly brought to life, the air vents from above letting out a warm gust of relaxing air.

I'm about ready to go home, to say the least, but I know I can't. Fish and Jack are still down there, enjoying themselves like I know I should be doing as well. Even if I were to drive home though - which I legally can't anyways, considering I don't have my license yet - they won't have a way of getting back to their houses. The memory of



promising Jack I wouldn't leave without him enters my mind and I officially cross the option of bolting off my list.

The thought of maybe taking a little nap enters my mind - to at least try and get rid of this awful headache - and I find it extremely difficult to keep my eyes open after that. The cushion of the headrest suddenly becomes the most comfortable surface I've ever rested my head on, and as I feel my shoulders relax, my eyes shut, allowing sweet sleep to take me over.

I don't dream, don't think as I drift off, and that's more than I could've asked for. I already have to spend so much of my days worrying about everything going on in my life, so the last place I want to have to continue that is in my dreams.

I'm not out for long though. Right as I'm about to enter full sleep mode, the car I'm in jolts to life, and the next thing I know, I'm moving backwards at an alarming speed, causing me to wake up in an instant. My foot must have accidentally move on to the acceleration while I was asleep - wow, way to go, Hiccup - so I slam the same foot as hard as I can against the brake pedal without thinking. Me doing this isn't what stops me though. It's the front of someone else's car that does that.

No. \_No no no no no no.\_ That one word repeats over and over again in my mind as I crawl out of the driver's seat and out into the cold night again, fully awake now. The brisk air hurts my throat as I take a breath in, causing me to cringe as I see the driver of the other car step out. I cringe yet again, maybe this time even harder, when I see the driver's face staring back at me with pure shock.

"Ah shit," I say under my breath as Astrid walks around the hood of her car and towards me, the color of her face growing more and more red with each step she takes. The determined look in her eyes sends chills to run up my spine. I'm dead. I've finally done it, I've finally crossed the line with her, and I'm as good as dead.

"Hiccup Haddock! Why youâ€¦ youâ€¦ AHHH!" she yells, stomping her foot out of frustration.

"I-I know this must look really bad, Astrid, but I can \_assure\_ you that-"

"Hiccup!" she goes on, not allowing me to finish. "You just dented my carâ€¦ my \_brand new car\_!"

Ah man. Like this night couldn't possibly get any more worse.

"Listenâ€¦ I'llâ€¦ I'll pay for it! I have the money, okay? I'll give you all of my work money from this summer and you can use all of it for repairs and-"

"Why do you always \_do\_ this?"

"Do what?"

"Always \_mess everything up!\_"

The words hurt me more than I had expected them to. Though I've heard

them countless times, coming from several different mouths, hearing them come from hers wounds me more.

"Astrid! chill. It's just a car!"

"Every time something bad happens around here, it's always because of you."

"That's not true!"

"Oh yeah? You wanna bet on that? What about that one time Ruff and I were working on that science project last year, huh? When you decided to help us out, everything went wrong and we failed!"

"T-t-that was an accident! How was I supposed to know that-"

"And that time I was at work and you ran into me, making Heather's shake splatter all over my favorite shirt, completely ruining it?"

"Oh, come on, Astrid. That was-"

"And not to mention that time you let Jack, someone completely unfamiliar with biking, race against Lout, the dirtiest racer in Berk, almost getting himself killed in the process!"

"Okay, fine! That was my fault, okay? Blame that one all on me, that one was all me. But listen! I've learned from that. I messed up and-"

"NO!" she cries. "You will never learn from your mistakes, Hiccup! Every time disaster falls, you say that, but nothing ever changes! I had been having the worse night tonight, and I thought that coming to this party would make me feel better. But no! You had to come along and completely ruin everything! That's all you ever do! Everywhere you go, you leave a mess behind!"

At these words, an image of my mom's face flashes in front of my eyes. My head stops hurting, but my insides become numbingly hollow.

Everywhere you go, you leave a mess behind.

I feel Astrid jog pass me, shoving me out of the way with her shoulder as she goes, her face still red with anger. All I can focus on are her words though, dangling in the air in front of me, my eyes glued to them as they force me to soak each of them in. Her quick footsteps fade out after a moment, leaving me alone in the darkness.

Everywhere you go, you leave a mess behind.

And she's right. She's so incredible right. Everything is always my fault. All the incidents she had pointed out, other incidents that she doesn't know about.

My mom's death.

I've been spending the last seven years trying to convince myself otherwise - that there was nothing I could've done to stop her from

dying - but in the end, it all comes back to me. Me being the selfish little kid I was, only thinking about myself and none of the other people around me. It was that greediness, that immature fixation on me, me, \_me\_.

If I had just listened to her, gone home when she asked me to, she would've never gotten in that car to begin with. She would've never been there when that truck ran that stop sign and rammed into her. She would still be here right now.

"Hiccup?"

The sudden voice startles me, snapping me from my thoughts and back into the real world. I turn around, wiping away the tear that I hadn't even noticed was making its way down my cheek, and come face to face with a concerned looking Jack.

"Hey, Jack," I let out in barely a whisper, my voice cracking as I let out a hard sniff.

The worried look on his face doesn't ease up as he takes a step closer to me. "Are youâ€¦ are you okay?"

For some reason I laugh a little at this. "N-no. Not really. Where'd Astrid go?"

"Tooth went after her," he says, approaching me steadily. "She wants to make sure she's okay. She seemed really upset."

"Yeahâ€¦"

"We, uhâ€¦ we heard what she said. And listen. She'sâ€¦ she's not right. You don't mess \_everything\_ up. I mean, the race with Lout wasn't your fault."

"Jack."

"What?"

"What happened to you while you were racing against Lout was definitely my fault. I mean, if anything really \_is\_ my fault, it's that."

"What are you \_talking\_ about?" Jack asks, looking flustered now. "That wasn't your fault. That was \_my\_ fault, all the way."

"How was that \_your\_ fault? I knew how dirty Lout biked, yet I still let you-"

"And \_I\_ knew that I didn't stand a chance, yet I still raced him. I'm to blame for that."

"No. Jack. That was definitely my fault. I should've stopped you before you got hurt."

"But I knew I'd probably get hurt and still raced anyways! It's my fault, Hiccup!"

"You know what. How about this? How about it's \_both\_ of our faults, okay?"

Jack raises an eyebrow at this, seeming confused at my suggestion.  
"\_Both\_ of our faults?"

"Yeah. Likeâ€¦ I'll take blame for half of it, and you take blame for the other half. That way, it's still both of our faults, but it's not \_entirely\_ \_one\_ of our faults, y'know?"

Jack, after a moment of what appears to be deep thought, sticks out his hand, a mock serious expression on as he asks me, "Sounds like a deal." We shake on it, causing a smile to break across my face, a smile on his following suit.

Tooth's voice calling out for us breaks through the night air then, and following her is Astrid, looking a lot more cooled down than earlier. Tooth shoots me a warm smile as a greeting, and then turns towards the boy at my side to say, "Hey, Jack. Let's go get those blankets from my car, okay? Give these two a moment alone."

Jack doesn't protest at this suggestion. I feel him pat me gently on the back, like he's passing some of his courage over to me via touch. As him and Tooth wander off, I take a glimpse over at Astrid, standing a couple feet away, shivering a little. That sweater of hers isn't doing her any justice and seeing her cold like this bothers me.

"Okayâ€¦ listenâ€¦" she begins with a sigh. "Iâ€¦ I stepped out of line earlier. With what I said."

I don't say anything; I don't know \_what\_ to say.

"Iâ€¦ my dadâ€¦ we got in a fight earlier tonight at dinner and I justâ€¦ I was already in a pretty bad mood when I arrived, y'know? And having you back into me like thatâ€¦ man, that just made my night even worse."

"Sorry about that again," I mumble.

To my surprise, I hear her let out a small laugh, wrapping her arms around her waist, probably to keep herself warm. "Yeah, I know you are. Andâ€¦ wellâ€¦ I guess I'm kinda sorry tooâ€¦ for what I said about you messing everything up. That was just uncalled for."

"Tell me about it."

She shoots me a playful glare, and I weakly smile back.

"Are you still upset with me about what happened with Jack?" I decide to ask, seeing that I have her here, actually listening to me for the first time in, like, two weeks.

She shrugs, brushing her bangs out of her eyes and wrapping her arms back around herself. "Kinda, a little. But, I meanâ€¦ he looks fine now, so I guess no harm done."

"He is."

"Is he upset with you for what happened?"

"No. He thinks it's his fault."

"That's bullshit."

"Yeah, I know, right? We decided that we're both to blame though, just so we could stop arguing about who's more at fault."

"Thatâ€¦ seems pretty efficient actually."

"Yeah."

"But, uhâ€¦ yeah, I guess we're all good now. Sorry againâ€¦ about earlierâ€¦"

"No, no. It'sâ€¦ it's fine. You were just upset and I get that and... yeah. But, uhâ€¦ does this mean that you'll actually, like, talk to me when I come to The Ring now? Because I can honestly say that I was beginning to miss you picking on me every time I dropped by."

The blonde laughs a little, shaking her head. "Yeah, I guess it does. And I guess\_ I\_ can honestly say that I was beginning to miss your irritating, sarcastic remarks to everything I say too."

A gust of chilling wind whirls around us then, and as I retreat further into my heavy jacket to avoid it, I notice Astrid shiver like crazy, wrapping her arms tighter around herself. Once the wind settles down, I knew what I have to do to seal the truths we've just established between each other. I peel my jacket off of my back, hoping and praying that it's not really \_that\_ cold out tonight, and pass it towards her. She looks stunned at first, seeing me offer her the article of clothing, and though I can tell there's some protest in her eyes, she takes it anyways. The thing's huge on her, going well pass her knees as she pulls her arms through the bulky sleeves. After she readjusts the collar around her neck, she looks over at me, letting a small smile appear on her red cheeked face.

"Thanks, Hiccup."

## 12. Go Get Some Rest

**\*\*Well, this chapter took a lot longer to write than I had expected.\*\***

Bah, I don't want to get all "I'M SO SORRY FOR NOT UPDATING SOONER AHHH \*tear\*" on you guys, so I'll spare you the sob story of how my life is so crazy and busy right now because of school and personal problems. Instead, I'll give you a new chapter! Hoozah!

Thanks all of you that stuck with me through this horrific break. I can't guarantee when I'll be able to update next, but I'll definitely try my hardest to make it soon!

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Ruff's the one that comes up with the idea.

"This party blows," is how she starts, her speech somewhat slurred. She's resting her pointed chin in the palm of her hand as Tooth and I join her, her brother, and Fish, all sitting over by the bon fire, all appearing to be a little out of it. The flames aren't as bright as they were when we had arrived about an hour ago, and it seems that everyone here's more interesting in that strange, yellow beverage to care about it.

Tee, cocking his head in the direction of the ramp leading back up to the parking, adds, "Yeah, wellâ€¦ you guys wanna get outta here or what?"

Fish jumps up from the log he's seated on, saying, "Yeah! We can-" but is cut off as he stumbles over himself and lands back on the chunk of wood. Ruff, ignoring him, just shrugs, like she couldn't care less.

"Do you think I could invite my friends too?" Tooth asks, sounding a bit nervous to speak. I suppose it's because she's never actually spoken to these people before, and I don't blame her for being a little skittish. When I had first met these guys - especially the twins though - I was a little more than intimidated. "They drove me here and I feel like-"

"Yeah, they can come. Whatever," Ruff says before Tooth can finish, waving her off.

Tuff adds, "They better just not be, like, annoying or anything."

Tooth shakes her head quickly. "O-oh, of course not! They're really nice people! I promise!"

The twins both shrug in unison, clearly losing interest in Tooth's mentioned friends. Their corresponding actions almost get a laugh out of me, and I can't help but wonder if they're aware that they're so in sync with each other.

"I'm going to go find East and all of them," Tooth tells me, her delicate fingers brushing my hoodie sleeve, making it hard for my throat to retrieve air for a moment. She quickly glimpses over at Fish and the twins, all wandering lazily back off towards the ramp to leave. "Will you wait for me?"

"Of course," I somehow manage to get out with a smile. "What kinda guy do you take me for?"

She returns my smile, her eyes squinting up like the usually do. Next thing I know, she's off, jogging towards the drinks, where I can hear Nik's vociferous laughter echoing through the night air.

I catch up with Fish and the twins, waiting for me at the bottom of the ramp. The twins look somewhat tired, but mostly just eager to get out of here as soon as possible. I can't help but wonder why that is, and I think about asking them - maybe in an attempt to start conversation - but that seems like the kind of question that would make Hiccup nudge and shoot me a watch-what-you-say look. Not to mention, Ruff and Tuff don't necessarily have this friendly charm to them either, so asking something like that, I think, wouldn't be the smartest thing to do.

The three teens are going on about places we could all possibly go, all of us ascend towards where Tooth and I had left Hiccup and Astrid. "A place where no one else is bound to be," Ruff says, since I suppose the main reason why the twins want to leave is to get away from the growing crowd. Fish asks me - I feel out of sympathy for not including me more in their exchange - if I know of any places we could go. The only place I can think of, however, is The Ring, since that's the only real hang out spot I've ever been to while living here. I end up just shrugging in response, and Ruff takes the spotlight by throwing out another option.

We finally arrive at the top of the ramp, Fish almost crashing into a large group of kids only now arriving. I look down at my watch as he searches for his keys in his back pocket, only to be reminded by Ruff that Hiccup took them earlier. Wow. It's actually past midnight. I've never been up past midnight before. Well, I mean, I've been up, sure; dozens of times. I've just never been out at this time though. A head of blonde hair pulled carelessly back into a single braid - whom I instantly recognize belongs to Astrid - calls out to us once Tuff and Ruff start getting into an insult battle over where we should do. Ruff gives Astrid what I assume is supposed to be a playful slug on the shoulder, only her aim is slightly off and she nearly punches her in the breast. As Astrid returns it with an equally as aggressive blow, I can't help but notice that she's wearing what I believe is Hiccup's jacket.

"What do you look so happy about?"

Speaking of which.

Turning towards Hiccup, standing on my opposite side from the others, I can't help but let a toothy grin spread across my face. "It's past midnight."

"Oh, is it now?" he laughs.

"Yeeeeeep."

"And this is significantâ€¦ whyyyyyyâ€¦?"

My grin grows larger. "I've never been out past midnight."

The small boy stares at me for a moment, seeming to be taking in what I've told him, and then he just laughs, shaking his head. "I swear, Jack. Sometimes you remind me of a five-year-old."

"You know, I pretty much am five-year-old, if you think about it."

"Yeah, and that's what scares me."

"Oh, don't be like that."

"It's hard not to when your best friend has the mental age of kindergartener."

Trying my hardest to not show too much bliss at him referring to me as his best friend, I shoot back with, "Admit it. You love having me around."

He rolls his green eyes. "Now where on earth did you hear \_that\_ nonsense?"

Overhearing Astrid, Fish, and the twins going on about who's going to be in whose car tells me that a destination has been decided, though I have no idea \_where\_ it is. Astrid is chiming in by saying that she can fit a good three other people in her car, so that means Hiccup, Tooth, whichever friends she brings along, and I are going to have to find another ride.

"Tooth said something about one of her friends driving her here," I pitch in. "We can probably just get a ride with them."

Astrid nods. "Sounds like a plan. You remember where the Caliban caves are, right Hiccup?"

"Dang, we're going there?" he asks, sounding a little surprised by this choice of destination. "Haven't been there in \_forever\_."

"Yeah, gonna visit some old roots," Tuff says, nudging his sister with a smirk. "Maybe we can even play some hide'n'seek, like we used to when we were kids. 'Member that, huh Fish? All those daaaaaaaaaaaaaaark and spoooooooooooooky caves we used to hide and get lost in?"

Fish shivers. "Yeah, uhâ€¦ let's not."

The twins take that as their queue to start making creepy "oOoOoOoOh" noises, wiggling their long fingers at the obviously frightened Fish. As they draw closer and Ruff quickly brushes Fish's red cheek with her fingertips, the larger boy lets out a loud yelp and darts off in the direction of Astrid's car, stumbling over his feet and nearly falling flat on his face. The twins, both wearing mischievous grins on their faces, race after him, continuing their taunting.

"Make sure they don't make him pee his pants, like they used to," Hiccup tells Astrid, and I have to fight the urge to burst out laughing. Even though it's awful thinking about poor kid-Fish peeing his pants because he's so scared, it's also rather comical to imagine.

Astrid gives Hiccup a knowing smirk. "You sure it's not \_you\_ you're talking about?"

I fight back another laugh and Hiccup elbows me in the stomach. "Oh, hahahahaha, you're too much, Hofferson, really."

She sticks her tongue out at him. "Soâ€¦ we'll meet you there?"

"Yes, ma'am. Oh, and please don't let Fish drive. Actually, now that I think about it, don't let the twins drive either."

"Pfft, you \_seriously\_ think I'd let those two psychos drive my car? You should know me better than that."

"Well, it'd be even worse now, considering I think they're all kinda drunk."



"Oh yeah? What gave you that idea?"

Hiccup laughs at this apparently joke - what does "drunk" even mean anyways? - and Astrid waves towards us, readjusting her - I mean, Hiccup's jacket on her shoulders. "Well, I should get goin'. Don't want the drunkards to mess up my car more than you've already done tonight. Don't get lost on the way here, alright?"

As she disappears behind rows and rows of cars, I ask Hiccup, "What does drunk mean?"

"Oh, uhâ€¦" he starts, shoving his hands into his jeans pockets. "You remember that drink Fish and I had you try earlier?"

"The one that tasted like eating a whole bunch of fire ants all at once?"

"Yes, Jack. The stuff that tasted like eating fire ants."

"What about it?"

"Well, if you drink too much of it, it makes you all, like, loopy and happy and stuff."

"And that's bad?"

"Depends on who you are, really. People that get buzzed can get kinda annoying after some time, so I generally try to avoid them."

"Have you even been drunk before?"

"Noâ€¦ but I've been tipsy."

"What's that?"

Hiccup turns towards me, giving me a look. "You know, you sure do ask a lot of questions."

Despite the fact that I really want to continue learning about all this new information I didn't even know existed until now, I take that as my queue to lay off. It's late, and even though I can tell he's trying his hardest to hide it, I can still tell that Hiccup's exhausted and probably isn't in the mood for my inquiry.

After a moment of silence though, he does speak up, asking me who exactly Tooth's friends are. I tell him about each of the boys, warning him about Nik's almost overwhelming enthusiasm, explaining to him about Sandy's condition, and enlightening him about East's baffling grudge against me. He suspects that there's something I must've done to get East to dislike me without even actually meeting me, and when I remind him of the infamous event of our first training session, he just snorts and shakes his head.

"Well, he just better not get on my back over something you did," the small boy tells me, crossing his arms. "If he does, then we may have a problem."

"What? Are you going to beat him up or something?"

"If he gives me as much as a weird, side glance, I don't see why not."

"Please tell me you're joking."

"And what if I'm not?" I can tell that he is.

"He's likeâ€¦ some sort of super buff kangaroo, Hic," I tell him.  
"Trust me when I say you wouldn't stand a chance."

"A wha- okay, I gotta see this guy."

A set of headlights make their way into my field of vision, and within second, Astrid's car is pulled up right in front of the two of us. The blonde girl rolls down the window, revealing Fish sitting beside her in the passenger's seat, and the twins crammed in the back.

"Hey, Fish wants his keys back," Astrid tells us, mostly referring to Hiccup, I assume.

"They're in my jacket's pocket," Hiccup informs her.

She reaches into said pocket, rustles around some, and then tosses the keys to Fish beside her. Turning back towards us, she smirks and says, "Oh, and, uhâ€¦ you \_maaaaay\_ wanna tell Fish about what happened to his car too."

"Waitâ€¦ whatâ€¦ w-what happened to my car?" The larger boy leans forward, pushing Astrid slightly out of the way so he can see Hiccup, whose face I notice has gone a deep red.

"Ohâ€¦" Hiccup whispers, rubbing the nape of his neck, not being able to make eye contact with his friend all of the sudden. "Haha, yeahâ€¦ Fishâ€¦ umâ€¦ about your carâ€¦"

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I only end up meeting one of the three boys that Jack warned me about. The ones named Nik and Sandy apparently want to stay at the party, considering they're having "such a good time" - go figure on that one - so the person that Tooth comes marching up the ramp with is the one I assume is East, judging by what Jack's told me about him.

He's the one that ends up driving us to Caliban Caves, since he's the only one that has a car - or a truck rather. I sit in the crammed backseat with Jack, Tooth up front with East, enduring what I believe has to be the most terrifying fifteen minutes of my entire life. I'm used to driving with Fish, and he isn't necessarily the fastest driver, since he's very cautious and gets really nervous about those kinds of things. East, on the other hand, doesn't appear to remember that he has other people in the car with him, because he's just barreling down the road like it's no one's business, making me extremely uneasy.

Jack, however, is able to keep my mind off the abrupt turns that are being made ever so often by showing me all these lame magic tricks that I learned back when I was five. I play along with him though, since I get the feeling he's probably spent a lot of time practicing these stupid tricks over and over again just for an occasion like this. Tooth is also encouraging him to continue, laughing and clapping her hands from the passenger's seat whenever he's successful, which I can tell makes Jack a little bit more than excited.

The only person in the car that doesn't seem impressed by Jack's tricks is East. Every time Jack is able to make a coin disappear and pull it out of my ear, I see the muscled teen scuff and roll his eyes from the rearview mirror, like he's seen this all before and isn't impressed. To say the least, these reactions are beginning to bug me. So what if these tricks are cheesy and overdone. Jack thinks they're cool, and apparently so does Tooth, so maybe this guy should just lighten up a bit.

I don't dare say those words though, since he looks like the kind of guy that could easily rip me arm out of its socket if he felt like it.

We eventually arrive at the Caliban Caves in one piece, parking right alongside Astrid's car, which is empty and locked. East asks where the rest of the group could be, sounding extremely impatient. As I point them all in the direction of the caves, just off behind a thin mass of trees with low branches, I can't help but wonder if he's just being forced to tag along, which makes me a little agitated. If he doesn't want to be here, why did he even come in the first place?

As a group, we all push our way through the trees, failing to stay silent as our shoes noisily crunch leaves and sticks underfoot. Once the caves come into view, Jack takes the lead, allowing one of the thinner branches to whip back and smack me dead in the center of my face. He lets out a hurried apology as I hear East surprisingly let out a laugh. Tooth gets all worried about my nose, which I can see while crossing my eyes is bright red. Looking back at Jack, I can't help but notice the playful smirk on his white face. Laugh while you still can, Frosty. I'll get my revenge.

As soon as we emerge from the trees, Fish, Astrid, and the twins appear, all sitting at the mouth of one of the narrow caves, flashlights glowing in their hands.

"Gods, \_finally,\_ " Tuff lets out at seeing us. He gets up from the ground and dusts off the butt of his jeans. "Took you guys long enough. What'cha get? \_Lost\_?"

"East's a really fast driver," Jack explains. "We missed a couple of turns along the way." As Fish walks up to him and passing his beaming flashlight over, I notice East shot a glare in Jack's direction, going undetected by both him and Tooth.

"Whatever," Ruff goes as Astrid walks up beside me, shining her flashlight in my eyes as a greeting. "Now that we're all here, what d'you guys feeling like doin'?"

Astrid offers telling ghost stories, but Fish is quick to shoot that one down, for obvious reasons. Jack says something about playing hide

and seek without flashlights, which most of us are up for, but then East reminds Tooth how she's afraid of the dark, which she sadly confirms to. Fish says that we could all just look up and study the stars, but the twins roll their eyes and say that that's "booooring".

"What about star tripping?" I suggest, going slightly off of Fish's approach. "Haven't done that in a really, really long time, have we? And there's even some new people here, so that should make it more than interesting."

"What the bloody hell is star tripping?" East asks, crossing his arms and looking doubtful.

"\_East\_," Tooth hisses. "Be niceâ€|"

Fish, obviously not noticing the exchange between the two, answers with, "It's kiiinda difficult to put into words. You gotta see it to understand how it works." He turns his large body back towards me, almost clumsily falling over himself, telling me the alcohol from before is still somewhat in his system. After adjusting himself, he adds on, "We can show them what to do. We have enough people."

"Hiccup can hold the flashlight and count," Astrid suggests. She tosses me her light, it stumbling in my hands as I catch it, but not falling to the ground. "The rest of you newbies might wanna step back. It can be kinda dangerous if you guys are standin' too close to the victim."

A nervous look suddenly appears in Tooth's eyes at what I assume was the mention of this being dangerous and someone being considered a victim. "Are, uhâ€| are you guys \_sure\_ this is a really good idea? I mean, if one of us could get badly hurt, than maybe we shouldn't-"

"Ooooooh, oh, oh, oh! I wanna be the first victim, I wanna be the first to get hurt! " Ruff interrupts in an overly zealous chants. She shoots her arm up into the air, waving it so fast you can barely make it out through the darkness. Tuff, however, reaches up and shoves it back down to her side, yelling, "No, I'm going first! I'm better at star tripping than you!"

"Says \_who\_?!"

"Says \_me\_! I can barely stand up straight as it is!"

"If you two idiots are gonna fight over it, \_I'll\_ just go first," Astrid volunteers, snatching the flashlight from Ruff and tossing it to Tooth, who, like me, barely manages to catch it. Astrid's blue eyes then move in my direction, narrowed as a smirk crawls on to her face. "I swear, if you led me off a cliff or something, Haddockâ€| I'll kill you. Understood?"

I return her grin. "Gee, thanks for foiling my plan, Astrid. You're no fun."

The twins and Fish all move into place circling Astrid, covering each of her sides. As I back up away from the group, turning my flashlight away from them, Jack catches my shoulder and asks, "Umâ€| care to

explain what exactly we're doing here?"

I playfully pat him on his icy cheek. "You'll see."

Basically, the objective of star tripping is to get the person in the center of the circle as dizzy as humanly possible. We've discovered that being spun endlessly by the people around you isn't quite enough to reach full dizziness capacity though, so the victim also has to look up as they're being kept in place, focusing on one star up in the sky as they're being spun round and round. Hence why it's called star tripping.

I watch Astrid being turned in circles, her arms, cloaked with the oversized sleeves of my jacket, crossed over her chest, her head thrown back as her braid flies behind her. Jack's laughing beside me, saying something to Tooth that I don't hear, because I'm focusing too much on the girl being spun a couple of meters away. She's somehow managed to keep her eyes open, unlike most people that dare to play this game, and her mouth is widened to the sky, allowing uncontrollable giggles and the occasional shriek out as she almost loses her balance and is saved by Fish's supporting arms. It's hard not to smile at seeing her like this; she's usually so serious and grim, all work and no play. Seeing her let loose, laughing and almost falling all over herself—well, it's definitely the Astrid that I prefer to see.

"Hiccup! Don't you think we've been spinning her for long enough?" Fish yells at me hurriedly, keeping an eye on Astrid so she doesn't collapse to the ground. The blonde starts to yell something through her laughs as I snap out of whatever mode I was in, but it's completely unable to be understood.

"Let her go!" I yell, bringing out the flashlight again and moving away from Jack, Tooth, and East. As the beam lands upon Astrid, the twins and Fish have parted from her, running away a safe distance. I can hear the twins chuckling as they jump on top of a rock near the mouth of the cave, then and Fish all ready to watch the show unfold before them. Once I see that they're in place, I begin to flip the flashlight on and off repeatedly, all while shining it right in Astrid's face. She appears disoriented at first, and I don't blame her; being the subject to star tripping is always the worse right after you've stopped spinning and you're trying to get your bearings on everything again.

Her perplexities come to an end when her instinct kicks in though. I know it when her eyes land on me, large, dazed, and confused, but full of intense determination.

"HICCUP!" I hear who I think is Fish yell from somewhere.  
"\_RUUUUUUN\_!"

Allowing my feet to take over, I continue to flash the light at Astrid, who's now barreling towards me at full speed. She nearly trips over her own feet as I begin to sprint in the opposite direction, the cold wind blowing through my hair and against my face as I make sure to keep the flashlight in her sight. She quickly rebounds from her fall, using her hand to push her off the ground and towards me again.

I don't know how long I run. It could've only been a couple of second

for all I know, but man, it felt like almost hours on top of hours. I'm not all too surprised when Astrid tackles me to the ground in one full pounce, knocking all the air out of me as my hand loses grip of the flashlight and we topple to the cold grass. She's a quick one, Astrid, especially when she has a target - which just sadly has to be me.

Her chest is still heaving, taking in large doses of lost air, as she pushes herself up, her eyes locking down on mine. Normally she would've just gotten up without making any contact, saying that I need to learn to run faster and that it's Ruff's turn to go, only, this time, she doesn't get up. Not instantly, that is.

"Sorry," she exhales, still obviously catching her breath. "I'mâ€| a lot fasterâ€| than I think. Especiallyâ€| afterâ€| y'know."

"Being spun around a couple dozen times in the middle of dark?"

I can see her smile, despite the veil of night around us.  
"Exactly."

"It's okay. Here." Gently taking her wrist, I manage to not only pull myself back up to my feet, but also her as well. She whips her bangs out of her eyes as I let go of her, mumbling something that sounds like a "thank you" as she diverts her eyes away from mine. If it wasn't so dark, I could've sworn I saw her cheeks light up a bit, but I may just be seeing things.

"Oooooooooh man! I \_gotta\_ do this next!" I hear Jack go from off back towards the cave. "Don't wanna miss my chance to get to attack Hiccup like that! This is gonna be \_great\_!"

Astrid lets out a laugh, breaking the silence between us, as I just roll my eyes.

As he had proposed, Jack does go next. His approach, after being released from his spinning, is nothing like Astrid's though. Where she had been abrupt and precise with her movements, Jack is more awkward and loose, constantly misstepping and falling flat on his face. It's extremely hard not to burst out laughing at this, and it makes me feel better to hear the rest of the gang - even East, surprisingly - joining in with me. Jack, of course, takes it all in stride, like he always does. As he shakily gets up, inching his way towards me, I notice an evil sneer appear on his face, and I know he means business now. Luckily for me, he's not fast enough on his feet while basically being considered drunk, so he's never able to catch me. When I notice that he's collapsed to the ground, his limbs all spread out in opposite directions, I assume he's given up.

I walk up to him, Tooth running in beside me, looking worried. "Are you okay, Jack?" she asks, bending down and touching his face with her hand.

He just grins sleepily up at us, letting out a small chuckle. "Le's do it again."

Ruff goes next, who resembles a rabid squirrel when she's chasing after me, and she's followed by her brother, who isn't even able to go after me since he can't even stay on his feet. Fish takes some convincing, despite his earlier excitement to the notion of star

tripping, and when he does finally go, I'm not disappointed. The fact that he's already tipsy makes his swooping and rolling after me even more entertaining.

"Tooth should go next!" Jack sings when Astrid asks who the next victim is going to be. "She hasn't gone yet! She still needs to go!" The white-haired idiot is jumping up and down as he runs towards the small, slightly frightened looking girl, taking her hand in his and leading her towards the twins and Fish. Before he can even get her halfway there though, East unexpectedly jumps into action, ripping Jack's hand off of Tooth's wrist and pulling her swiftly away from him. The whole thing happens so fast, but everyone witnesses it - even the preoccupied twins, who were arguing loudly with each other about something stupid behind me.

"East, what are you-" Tooth begins to ask after a second, but when she sees that all of our attention are on her and friend, her face turns a deep red in embarrassment.

"You betta watch yourself, mate," East threatens, not paying any attention to any of us - not even Tooth - but only the shocked Jack in front of him.

"Hey, i-if she wants to go next, you should let her go," Jack surprisingly defends himself. I move in his direction, in case he needs some aid - like I could help if this were to get physical anyways - but he doesn't seem to notice. His gaze is locked on East, a hardened expression I've never seen before on him morphing on to his features.

"If I do recall," East fights back, letting go of Tooth's wrists and brushing past her while advancing on Jack, who takes a clumsy step back towards me, "she never said she wanted to go. Looked more like you were forcing her to."

"Thatâ€¦ that wasn't what I was doing thoughâ€¦"

"\_East\_. Leave him alone," Tooth says harshly. "He was just-"

"You need. To remember. Your. Place." As East comes toe to toe with Jack, I'm suddenly able to see just how huge he is; Jack is about a solid five ten, easily, standing his ground as this gigantic teen sends a venomous glare down at him. East thoughâ€¦ well, he's an entire head and a half taller than the poor kid, making him look like a dwarf in comparison.

"Hey, relax," I hear Astrid tell the two boys, taking a step towards the scene. "He was just messin' around, alright? He didn't mean her any harm."

"I'm fine, East. Really," Tooth backs Astrid up. She takes a step in between the two boys, probably hoping to break them apart at least a little bit and easing the tension. "I want to go next. I really do. I mean, I think it'd be fun."

Though I can tell East has been convince somehow by his friend not to beat the living crap out of Jack, he doesn't break his eye contact from him. Jack, for his own credit, is returning his hard glare pretty well; he hasn't taken his blue eyes off of East's this entire time, despite the fact that I can see his balled up fists trembling

at his sides.

Astrid moves around me and towards Tooth, coaxing her towards where the twins and Fish stand, still staring awed at what's just happened. Their stunned expressions are snapped clean off their faces though seconds later, and I know it's probably because Astrid gave them a stern look so brutal, they didn't have any other choice but to dismiss it.

Tooth goes, and of course, she's laughing and shrieking as the four spin her around and around in the dark. East, I notice, lurks off away from where Jack and I stand, keeping a firm eye on Tooth, which bugs me, and I can also tell, bugs Jack.

"That was scary," I hear him say next to me, his arms shoved into his hoodie's pockets.

"Yeah. You looked pretty scared," I tell him.

He looks worriedly down at me. "Did I?"

"Don't worry 'bout it. I think we were \_all \_a little scared."

"You were scared?"

"Duh, of course I was. I wasn't sure if he was gonna beat you up or what."

"What if he had though?"

"Then Astrid would've swooped in and given him what for instead."

Jack lets out a laugh, and I hear Fish call for me to get the flashlight ready.

Tooth star tripping is like the equivalent to someone being one hundred percent drunk, plus maybe a little high. She collapses instantly and has the most difficult time getting back on her feet, just like Tuff had been like when he had gone. East is watching her avidly from a distance, not losing contact with her as she darts and falls all over the place, practically intoxicated on her own laughter. Once she buckles to the ground and says through her giggles that she can't get up, it isn't East that comes to her aid - it's Jack.

"Can I do it again?" the small girl asks, still allowing laughs to escape her lips as she brushes her hair out of her face, Jack's hand on her waist as he steadies her.

"Nah, not yet," Astrid goes, grabbing her arm to help Jack balance her. "We got one more person that needs to go."

"Oh? Who's that? I thought everyone had gone already!"

Astrid turns towards me, that horrible smirk on her face.

"Oooooooooooh! Astrid! Oh, oh, oh!" Jack sings from beside her, jumping on his toes. "Can I do the flashlight thing? I want to make



Hiccup trip all over himself and stuff! I'm really fast! He won't be able to catch me, I promise!"

"Jack?" I say.

He turns his attention towards me.

"You're a horrible friend, you know that?"

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Hiccups star tripping idea only lasts about one more round for each of us before we all get too disoriented to take any more turns. East is the only one that hasn't gone once, and no matter how much Tooth pleads for him to at least try, he won't seem to budge. I don't necessarily mind this. Though, I'll admit, it'd be more than a little amusing to be the one in control of the flashlight during his turn. I could have a lot of fun with an excuse like that.

The opportunity never presents itself though, and I'm fine with that. Tooth seems to be more on my side with what happened earlier, and for that, I am grateful. The last thing I want is for her to think that I was forcing her to go, thought I get how it probably looked that way. I guess it doesn't really matter anymore though. She tried it, loved it, did it again, and loved it even more. I guess that means I won that battle.

The eight of us all find refuge in the dark shadows of the cave afterwards, sitting on the cool ground in a sloppy circle, our numerous flashlights eerily lighting up the stone walls around us. The twins are, of course, side by side, but I can notice Fish sitting awfully close to Ruff, looking like he half hopes she doesn't notice, but also that she does. Astrid and Hiccup, despite the one-sided feud they had been in now being broken, are sitting on opposite sides of the circle, but I don't question it. I just so happen to get lucky enough to land a spot next to Tooth, sitting all crossed legged and up straight beside me. Having East on her other side makes it not quite as pleasant of an experience as I would like though, since I can see him giving me calloused looks I don't necessarily like having thrown at me.

"We should play Truth or Dare," Ruff suggests, since I suppose we had been discussing on what we should do now. I peer down at my watch as everyone agrees, and see that it's nearly one in the morning. Is it weird that I don't feel tired yet?

"ASTRID!" Tuff yells, making everyone jump. "TRUTH OR DARE?"

I'm about to lean over and ask Hiccup what this whole "truth and dare" thing is, when Ruff yells back at her blonde twin, "Hey! No way! I suggested we play, so I get to go first!"

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah! That's the rule, you numbskull!"

"DARE!" Astrid yells a delayed response, the look on her face telling me she's hoping that'll stop their pointless bickering.

Tuff sends his sister a smug grin, and she returns it with slugging him in the shoulder, but lets him go anyways. "I dare yooooou," he says, rubbing his shoulder and looking up at the ceiling of the cave, like his dare is hiding up there. "Toâ€ pick your nose and show the bugger us!"

Fish and Tooth both let out a disgusted unison of "ewwwwwwww!", both of their faces scrunching up like they've just smelled something awful. Astrid shots Tuff an unamused gaze, and Hiccup simply puts his hand to his face, like he's feeling secondhand embarrassment for Tuff, which is hard not to snicker at.

"Oh! Here's a better one," Ruff goes, shoving her brother to the ground roughly and leaning on top of his bent over back. "I dare you toâ€ sing every word you say for the next five minutes!"

"Laaaaaaaaaaaaame," Tuff goes from under his sister.

She elbows him in the side. "Who asked you?"

Astrid merely shrugs at the dare, clearly agreeing to the challenge. She tries singing her words as she asks Hiccup truth or dare, but she can barely get the sentence out since she's having such a hard time not laughing. Asking if she really has to keep singing, Ruff informs her that it's against Truth or Dare tradition to break a dare, and that if she does end up deciding to break it, then she's to be labeled as a darer-breaker for the rest of her days in Berk. Astrid accused Ruff of making that word up, which even I could've told you, but Ruff just shrugs her off nevertheless.

The game goes on rather smoothly, and I find I'm enjoying myself hearing with all the others reveal their truths and act out their dares. Hiccup and Fish always choose truth though, and when I question Hiccup why this is while Tuff performs this song that everyone referred to as I'm A Little Teapot while standing in the center of the circle, he tells me he's had some bad experiences with dares - all of which are surprisingly Ruff and Tuff related - which I suppose is understandable.

I'm dared - truth just seems so boring to me - to reenact a television commercial of my choice, being allowed to use any of the people in the circle as helpers. Since the only time I really watch television is when I'm babysitting the Bennett's and Baby Tooth with Tooth, I pick her to be my loyal assistant. Lucky for me, it only takes her a couple of seconds to tell which advertisement I'm performing; it would be hard for her to forget it, since it's this one commercial that's so utterly ridiculous, and I've pointed it out to her every time it comes on to the screen. As everyone else starts yelling out guesses, I notice that East is shooting me one of his glares again, but he drops it as soon as he sees that I've caught him. For some reason, seeing him turn away like that, that annoyed look occupying his face, makes me want to confront him straight up and ask him what he deal with me is. I don't though, because apparently Hiccup's guessed the right answer and everyone's exclaiming, "Ooooooh! Yeah! I remember that one!"

I make Fish tell everyone whether or not he's peed in a pool before - "Ugh, Jack! Really?!" is Tooth's reaction to that. He admits that he has, but adds on quickly, stealing a glimpse at the snickering Ruff beside him, "but I was, like, five!" in his defense.

He then dares Ruff to close her eyes, smell someone's armpit, and try and guess who it is, to which she excitingly accepts. After smelling her chosen person's pit, she guesses Tuff almost instantly, and is surprised when she's told it was actually Astrid, to which Astrid's embarrassed explanation is, "It's been a really long night, okay!"

Ruff then turns towards Tooth, still sitting beside me, leaning slight towards me as she gulps down her fear at being picked to go next. The small girl chooses truth when Ruff asks, like she's been doing every turn, and the twins both let out heavy, dramatic sighs.

"You guys are so \_booooring\_" Tuff complains.

"Yeah," Ruff agrees. "Always choosing truths 'n' stuff."

"Well, with \_you\_ guys, truths are the only safe way to go," Hiccup explain to them. "I mean, your guy's dares are \_insane. \_And not to mention, uh, \_disgusting on so many levels.\_"

"But that's the whole point of choosing dare," Astrid tells him matter-of-factly. "They've gotta be ridiculous, and sometimes even gross, to be good."

"Obviously your definition of a good dare and my definition of a good dare are two very different things."

"Fine, fine," Tooth speaks up with a laugh. "I'll do it. I'll switch my choice to dare."

"Anaâ€¦" East next to her starts as the twins give each other triumphant high fives and Hiccup tells her she'll be sorry, but she just shrugs his objection off. Serves him right. Tooth's not a child; she can make her own decisions.

"Alright, alright. Let's seeeeeeeeâ€¦" Ruff goes, her hand rising to her chin as she studies little Tooth across the circle from her. "How aboutâ€¦ AH! I got it! It's traditional and, y'know, kinda lame, but, ooooooooooooh man, it's gonna be worth it!"

Tooth looks back at the long-haired blonde, asking what the dare is with a smile that tells me she's scared stiff.

"I dare youâ€¦ to kiss your East friend there. Right on the lips too, so don't think you can find some lame loophole out of this or anything!"

A kissâ€¦ oh yeah! I know what that is. It was one of the things I learned from Emma in that first week I was "rediscovered the world". The poor, little girl had been determined to describe it to me properly, and I had been so at a loss for why someone would ever do such a thing to another person. The whole act of putting your lips, such a sensitive part of your face, against someone else - it all seemed too curious and bizarre to me. When I explained these thoughts

to Emma, she tried even harder to illuminate to me exactly why people kiss - that it's to show another person how much you care for them - but I just couldn't grasp it. I still remember that, at seeing my confusion, Emma leaned over the coffee table and kissed me right on the cheek, and I suppose I can say that, well, I understood what she meant.

Thinking about this makes me feel a strange pang inside of my chest. I don't want Tooth to kiss East. Not on the mouth or cheek or anywhere. The mere thought makes something inside of me just burn and boil, and I don't want to have to watch her touch him in such a delicate way.

I had thought that the feeling I was having after Ruff had made the dare, Tooth and East turning towards one another, looking a little perplexed and red-faced, was bad enough. The second both of their lips clumsily lock with each other, I'm feeling an entirely new feeling stir up inside of me, my body barely being able to contain it.

I don't say anything though as the two's lips separate, after what felt like a lifetime. I don't stand up or move or even breathe as Tooth looks down at her hands in her lap, her dark skin still tinted a light pink. I don't dare look at East sitting beside her, afraid of what I'll see on his face.

The game continues on, but I'm barely there. Every once and awhile, I'll be asked truth or dare by one of the others, and I decide to settle for truth. The idea of actually having to get up from my spot to do something doesn't seem very pleasant right now, considering the wave of dreariness that has just overcome me, leaving me wishing to lay my heavy head down on my soothing, warm pillow back home.

I suppose everyone else is beginning to feel this way, because Astrid gets up and says she's thinking of heading home, and no one disagrees. As I pull myself up from the algid ground, readjusting my hoodie and looking at my watch, I notice that it's almost two in the morning. Yeah, it's definitely time to get home.

East drives Hiccup and me back to where Fish left his car back at Ravan Point, so we can have a ride home. No one talks during the ride, but I'm not all too surprised. East focuses on the road, Tooth stares out the passenger's window, seeming lost in thought, and Hiccup and I just sit in the backseat, exchanging quick looks every one awhile, but never saying anything.

It's a relief to finally get out of that truck, even if it means leaving Tooth for the night. She waves to me through the dark tinted window as East pulls away, a kind smile spreading across her lips, making me forget about what had happened earlier just for a moment.

The twins take themselves home, both of them fighting over who gets to drive all the way to their car lost in the shadows somewhere. Astrid also drives herself, forgetting to give Hiccup back his jacket as she waves back to us and tells us to drive safely. I think of reminding him about the piece of attire, in case he wants it back, but he looks right at her as she gets into her dented car and doesn't say a word; just smiles ever so slightly.

"Do you think you can drive?" Hiccup asks, turning towards Fish as Astrid's driving off, her headlights vanishing behind the trees, leaving us in the chilly darkness.

The large boy shakes his head wearily, his eyelids barely staying open.

"How are going to get home then?" I ask. "We can't walk."

Hiccup moves forwards and digs through Fish's jacket pocket, Fish not seeming to notice him at all, he's so out of it. He pulls out a shiny pair of keys, turns towards me, and says, "Guess we're gonna break the law tonight, guys."

Hiccup proves himself to be a pretty good driver, for someone who doesn't have their license yet. He goes extra slow though the entire way home because, one, he doesn't want to attract any unwanted attention, and two, he also doesn't want to wake the snoring Fish lying in the backseat. We mainly drive in silence, only, unlike when we were crammed in the back of East's truck, it's comfortable. We're both tired, we can both tell, so we keep our thoughts to ourselves.

It isn't until we pull up half a block from my house that Hiccup cuts the engine, leans back in his seat, and asks, "Can I ask you something, Jack?"

I nod.

"Do you like Tooth?"

"Wellâ€¦ yeah," I go, laughing a bit at the odd question. "I mean, she's really sweet and kind, and she's really fun. Kind of shy, but she's a really great-"

"No, Jack. Not like that," he stops me, laughing and rubbing his forehead. "I meant, like... Gods, this sounds so stupid, but likeâ€¦ like like."

My response to that question is simply me staring back at him, a dumbfounded look on my face, no doubt. What does "like like" even mean?

"Likeâ€¦ do you like her in that way?" he goes on, trying to explain himself. "Kinda like how I like Astrid. You know. A romantic kinda way, right."

"Ohâ€¦"

Wellâ€¦ now that I think about itâ€¦ that doesn't seem like a very far-fetched thing to ask. I meanâ€¦ wellâ€¦ I don't really know what it's like to be attracted to someone else; honestly, I've never really thought about it before. I do, however, see the way Hiccup looks at Astrid sometimes when he doesn't think I notice, with this soft gaze and easy smile that pretty much tells me that he'd be willing to give her the world and then some. I wonder if he's ever caught me giving Tooth that kind of look before, and a part of me really hopes he hasn't, because that would be a little embarrassing on my part. Have I though? How do I feel when I look at Tooth? Do I feel someone different than what I feel when I look at someone like

Astrid or Ruff or any other girl for that matter?

The memory of earlier tonight, when Tooth and East exchanged a kiss, replays in my head, and the feeling I had experienced then burns from within my stomach. Suddenly, I'm aware of why I had felt so rattled at watching the two be so close to one another.

I turn back towards Hiccup. "Does wanting to kiss someone mean you like like them?"

Hiccup merely smiles weakly in return, looking amused at my question. "Yes, Jack. Wanting to kiss someone does mean you like like them."

"Oh. Wellâ€¦ then I think I like like Tooth then."

"Well, congrats then, buddy. I mean, not congrats on what you had to see tonight, 'cause that was kinda... well... you know."

My heart sinks a little in my chest at being reminded of the event again. "Yeah..."

"But hey! You got your first ever crush ever!" Hiccup goes on, playfully punching me on the shoulder. "It feels like just yesterday I was teachin' ya how to ride your bike, and look at you now. You're growing up so fast!" He places his pointer finger right underneath his eye and pulls it slowly down his cheek, I'm guessing acting like he's crying. I roll my eyes at him in response.

"How are you gonna get home?" I decide to ask.

"Are you changing the subject, Mister Overland?"

"It's getting late. I want to go to bed."

"Yeeeeeeah," Hiccup goes, letting out a long yawn. "I definitely feel ya. I'll probably just drive to Fish's place, deliver him there without getting noticed, then walk to my place."

"You're going to walk home in the dark?"

He shrugs. "It's only a couple of blocks."

I think about volunteering to stay with him, helping him get Fish into his bed without waking his family, and then making sure he gets home safely. Now that I think that plan over though, I can see the many holes in it. If I'm all the way back in the suburban part of Berk without a car, how on earth am I to get home?

"I'll be fiiiiiiine," I hear Hiccup reassure me, unlocking the car door with a loud clack that doesn't cause Fish to stir somehow. "I promise to not talk to any strangers and to stay in well-lit areas, alright?"

I laugh and pull myself out of the car, telling him he's the weirdest person I know. As he shoots back a comeback that I don't hear, I look off and see my house sitting in near darkness, only the porch light completely visible from where I stand. I wonder if my parents had realized I'm gone. Doubt it. If they had, the lights would surely be on and maybe even a police car would be sitting in our

driveway.

"Earth to Jack, do you copy?"

Bending back down so that he can see from where he sits, I throw him an apologetic smile. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

The small boy rolls his eyes, letting out a tired grin that makes me feel even sleepier. "You're tired," he points out to me, turning the keys, causing the car to come alive again. "Go get some rest."

### 13. If You Ever Need to Talk

**\*\*First, I'd just like to say HAPPY NEW YEARS GUYS!\*\***

2014 is gonna be a hella rad year, I can just feel it. I mean, with the HTTYD2 movie coming out in the summer and everything, how could it not be? I'm just so incredibly pumped for that movie, I can't even put it into words, augggh!

Anyways. So. Yes. I am still alive and this fic is still alive as well. These last two months though have been somewhat chaotic for me with college apps and mid terms and personal shenanigans and all that good stuff. Not to mention the complete lack of motivation that came over me by surprise as well, but you guys don't wanna hear about that.

Oh yeah, and warning! There's, like, a whole bunch of Frostbite/Rainbow Snowcone in this chapter, so heads up. It's not like gross, God-make-them-stop kinda stuff, just flirty awwwwwww kinda stuff.

Thanks for all the lovely reviews and love! I appreciate and cherish each and every one of you, oh yes, I love you all so very much!

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Normally, on Sunday mornings, only one of two things manage to wake me up. There's either the sun that peers through my blinds, telling me it's about time I stumbled out of bed and got the day started. Then there's Toothless, who'll take it upon himself to climb up on to my pillow and start licking the inside of my ear, mostly, I'm sure, just because he wants to be fed.

This particular Sunday though, I'm not awakened by either of these two things. Instead, as my eyes begin to clear after being opened into slits, I see a tiny, blonde girl jumping up and down on my bed beside me, chanting something like, "HIC! CUP! GET! UP!" over and over again, her legs pumping so hard, her head almost smashes into the ceiling fan.

"Caaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaamiiiiiiiiiii," I let out, rolling on to my stomach and hiding my face in my pillow. This is even worse than having Toothless' tongue in my ear.

"Oh, good! You're up!" Cami cheers, still jumping, despite having gotten my attention. Obviously she's having way too much fun to stop now, much to my displeasure.

"What are you doing here?" I say into the pillow.

"I am your prisoner for today! Do with me as you will, master!" The springs of my mattress stop their squeaking, and a cushioned thud that can only be her falling down on to my bed beside me replaces them. I hear muffled words escape her mouth, completely unable to be understood.

Removing my face from the pillow, I turn towards her and grumble, "I have no idea what you just said.

Her reply is just as incoherent as before.

"Have you seen Toothless anywhere?" I ask next, rolling on to my back and rubbing the sleep out of my eyes.

She talks into the mattress again, saying words I can't make into a real sentence.

"Have you eaten yet?"

Same reply as before.

"You wanna help me finish off the ice cream for breakfast? Or... lunch... or... whatever time is it?"

That gets the small girl's attention; she's moved up into a downward dog, her blue eyes full of life and excitement. As I pull myself up, clumsily trying to readjust my shirt that's almost turned itself in a complete one-eighty, her joyed expression changes and she studying me with narrowed eyes.

"Are you messin' with me, Burp?" she asks, sitting up and jabbing a finger at me. "'Cause I don't like it when people mess with me."

"Do I look like I'm messing with you?"

Rubbing her chin, she looks me up at down. "I can't tell with you."

"Well, I can assure you that I'm not messing with you."

She pauses, still studying me, then asks, "Can I have the strawberry ice cream?"

"I... don't think we have strawberry?"

"Yes, you do."

"We do?"

"I saw your dad put it in the fridge a couple days ago. Mom and I were here and I saw it."

"Okay. Sure. Fine. You can have the strawberry ice cream."



At hearing this, she rockets up off the bed and tumbles down on to the carpeted floor, letting out a piercing cheer of triumph that makes my ears throb for a moment. As I move myself out of bed, running my hands through my no doubt chaotic hair, she shouts at seeing Toothless now sitting in the doorway; he had probably been resting on the back of the couch downstairs, but became curious when he heard all the commotion coming from up here. As soon as Cami starts rushing towards him, crawling on all fours, he jumps and darts back down the stairs, probably to go seek shelter under my dad's bed.

I listen to Cami making her way noisily down to the lower level of house as I wobble into the bathroom and start running the shower. While waiting for the water to get to my preferred temperature, I wonder what I'm going to do today with Cami tagging along, something that limits me on a lot of options. I suppose we could just stay here, keep Toothless company and watch a movie or two, but then again, I don't really want to stay indoors today; I've been doing too much of that lately anyways. Something tells me too that Cami probably won't last long locked away inside either, considering her impossible amount of energy.

I shower, hoping and praying to every god I know that Cami doesn't hurt Toothless in her pursuit to capture him, or worse, burn down the entire house in some freak accident. After drying myself off, putting on my prosthetic, and throwing on the first clothes that my hands make contact with, I go downstairs to find her sitting happily on the couch, Toothless lying on the armrest on the opposite side from her, keeping his distance. She's holding a thick, hardcover book in her small hands, flipping through it while humming loudly and swinging her legs.

"What'cha got there?" I ask, moving into the kitchen and towards the cupboard where we keep the bowls. I told Cami we'd have ice cream for lunch - it can't be for breakfast, considering it's nearly eleven now - and I have to keep that promise.

Cami lifts the book from her lap and flashes it towards me, despite the fact that I'm too far away to make out any of the pictures. "Mom got it for me for my birthday last year!" she exclaims eagerly. "It's everything anyone could ever want to know about \_dragons\_!"

I laugh, opening the freezer and grabbing the frost covered strawberry ice cream carton. "You really like dragons, don't you?"

"Well, yeah. What's there \_not\_ to like?"

"TouchÃ©."

"But there's some really cool dragons in here," she goes on excitedly, placing the book back in her lap and flipping through the pages. "Some I didn't even know existed until I read about them in- oh, oh, oh! Like this one!" The small girl jumps up and runs to the square island stationed in the center of the kitchen, where I'm preparing our ice cream meals. She takes a seat on one of the bar stools as and turns the book so it's upwards for me, pointing at a pitch black sea serpent-like thing with bright green eyes, a long, thin tongue sticking out from between its pointed teeth.

"This guy here is called the Doomfang," Cami explains seriously. "He can hypnotize you and he shoots blue flames out of his mouth that can freeze a man alive! With super-fast speed and unbeatable hunting skills, the Doomfang has only been seen by a small amount of people—that is, if they live to tell the tale."

"He looks kinda like Toothless here, doesn't he?" I ask as Toothless himself jumps up on to the counter to join us, and I rub under his chin, causing him to let out a series of purrs. "Have \_you\_ ever seen a Doomfang before, Cam?"

"Naaah, but I will one day! I'll be sure to tell you about it when I do, alright?"

"Sounds good. What else is in there?"

Cami flips some more through the pages, seeming excited to see that I've taken an interest in her dragon book. "These little guys here are called Venomous Vorpents," she goes on as I plop ice cream scoops into our bowls. She's stopped on another page that depicts a small, yellow creature with a long body and sharp, pointed tail. "Though it may be ridiculously small, its sting is extremely fatal. Not one person has ever lived through a Venomous Vorpent's sting. EVER."

"May I make an observation?" I ask, putting two scopes into Cami's bowl.

"You may."

"None of these dragons seem particularly nice. Are there any, like—that you know—\_good\_ dragons? Like, dragons that won't try and kill you on spot?"

Cami takes a moment to digest what I've asked her, and then goes right into flipping through the humongous book again, muttering under her breath words I can't make out. By the time I've finished preparing our ice cream and have stored the container back in the freezer, she's apparently found something along the lines of my request.

"It's called a Common or Garden dragon, also known as the Basic Brown," she tells me. She lifts the silver spoon I set in her bowl, a lump of pink ice cream sitting in its cradle, and takes a large, satisfying bite. Once she's swallowed, she continues. "They're the most familiar breed of dragon known to man and they're—honestly not that awesome. They suck at hunting, and all they have for their defense is their claws and spines."

I smile as I shoo Toothless off the counter, since I noticed him eyeing my ice cream. "Sounds like my kinda dragon."

"You're weird."

"I bet they're fast, since they're so small. That should count for something."

Cami skims the page for a moment, cramming another large scoop of ice cream into her mouth while doing so. "It says here that they're only fast in retreat."

"I guess that's the only time when it really matters."

"That's true. They're still sucky dragons though."

"You take that back."

"\_Make\_ me."

"I have an idea," I say, taking the seat beside her on the island. "How about we go on a dragon expedition today. You know, to try and see what kinda dragons we have here in Berk. We can even take your book there so we know which ones we can approach and which ones we should get away from."

The amount of thrill I see in Cami's eyes is indescribable. If I didn't know better, I'd think no one had ever offered to go on a dragon expedition with her before. Now that I think about it though, no one probably has.

"That's the best idea \_EVER!\_" the small girl yells, jumping up and down in her seat, almost knocking her bowl of ice cream clear off the island, which I can tell Toothless wishes would happen. "Oh man! Since it's forested and dark here, we'll probably find, likeâ€¦ a Brightclaw or a, a, a," She gasps, her eyes growing wide. "An \_Exterminator!\_ Ooooooh man! Those are \_so cool!\_ They're transparent, so you can see their organs and stuff!"

"What about a Basic Brown?" I ask. "Do you think any of those are 'round here?"

Cami rolls her eyes, not seeming impressed by my question. "I don't see why not. But c'mon, Burp! Basic Browns are \_lame!\_ There are so many more cooler dragons to find out there!"

"Speak for yourself," I say. "I'm gonna find me a Basic Brown if it's the last thing I do."

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"Jack! Come down here!"

I'm up in my room, scanning the pages of a book my father allowed me to borrow about an ancient, ruined city he referred to as \_Pompeii\_ when I hear my mother's voice call up for me. I let out a heavily annoyed sigh, folding the corner of the page I'm on down and shutting the hard-backed cover. Leave it to my mother to be the ban of my entire afternoon with only using four words.

My mother is positioned in the foyer, speaking to someone I can't see outside the front door. When I hear a voice that I'd be able to pinpoint anywhere, I quicken my step down the stairs, my heart throbbing at a ridiculously fast pace.

"Hey, Jack," the small girl I recognize only as Tooth greets me, cocking her head as she sends a toothy grin my way. At seeing her, my

thoughts instantly go to last night, sitting in a circle with everyone, and the kiss she planted on East's lips.

"Hey, Toothy," I say back, trying my best to keep such thoughts out of my head and off of my face.

"Ana here was wondering if you could hang out today," I hear my mother informs me, startling me by actually knowing Tooth's real name. By the pleasant smile on the woman's lips, I can tell that she's fine with me doing just this, which causes some anger to well upside of me. Sure, I can hang out with \_Tooth\_, because she has nothing to do with bikes, but when it comes to \_Hiccup\_, oh no, that's a no go.

I don't voice how much this upsets me though. Instead, I ask her if I can go, to which she agrees, as long as I'm home before dinner.

Once the front door is closed and Tooth and I have made our way through the front lawn and to the dirt road, the tiny girl turns swiftly to face me, causing me to stop in my tracks, and asks, "Do you think your parents know about how you snuck out last night?"

I raise an eyebrow, practically forcing myself to keep my cool while I'm with the girl I suppose I officially, uhâ€¦ what was the word Hiccup used last night? Oh, right. \_Like like.\_

"No, I don't think they do," I tell her truthfully, running my hand through my hair. "I mean, I did everything I could to make it seem like I wasn't out. I even washed my jacket as soon as I got home so it wouldn't smell like smoke."

"Yeah, same. My parent's would've \_flipped\_ if they knew I had gone out."

"Are they over protective or something?"

"A teensy bit, yeah."

"On a scale from 'not caring at all' to 'my parents', how protective are they exactly?"

The small girl playfully bumps me on the shoulder with hers, a little grin forming on her face. "Oh, be quiet you."

When I ask her what we're going to be doing today, she tells me she has this place in mind that she wants to show me; she says it's a place her mother and her once hiked to when they had just moved to Berk and were exploring the woods together.

"My mother's a real nature freak," Tooth explains to me as we move down the shoulder of the road and towards the forest, sounding a little embarrassed to admit this. "She's into all that kind of stuff, you know. All the different bird calls and animal tracks. She tried to get me into it, and I find it fascinating, sure, but I'm not, like, \_ecstatic\_ about it."

"I don't really know that much about your family," I think out loud.

She gives me a weird look. "Andâ€¦ what? Do you \_want\_ to know about

my family?"

"Wellâ€¦ yeah. I mean, I find you ratherâ€¦ uhâ€¦ ugh, what's the wordâ€¦? Oh! Interesting. So, I don't know. You probably come from a pretty interesting family."

"You know, using the word 'interesting' to describe a girl really isn't the right way to get her to like you, Jack."

I frown. "To like- wait, what?"

Tooth just lets out a laugh, patting me briefly on the back. "I'm just messing with you."

As we come to the edge of the woods and start heading down an already manmade trail marked by a sign and boulders, Tooth begins to explain to me who exactly the Farry family is. She tells me of her mother and father, Rashmi and Haroom, living in a place she refers to as Bangladesh. Her father was even a dentist then, only work was hard to find, since the people in the city she lived in were often impoverished and couldn't afford proper dental work. Her parents worked hard to support their family, but as Tooth grew older and her mother became pregnant with Baby Tooth, it seemed that they had no real future in Bangladesh. With the money they had saved, they packed up their belongings, said goodbye to their relatives, and moved here to America, where they hoped Dr. Farry's dental career would be more successful.

It took some time for him to move up the ladder to where he is today, since he started out as a simple dentist's assistant. By the time Tooth had entered middle school though, he had found a job here in Berk, a town in need of a general dentist, and took it without a second thought. Since then, Berk's where they've been, her father checking up on all the residence's teeth, and her mother working as one of the receptionists at his office.

"What about you?" Tooth asks me as we climb over a large mountain of rocks in the way of our path. "You barely ever mention anything about your family to me. You got something to hide?"

"What are you talking about?" I laugh, keeping a close eye on her stepping, ready to catch her if she happens to misstep and fall. "I told you about my mother and how she locks me away in my room, trying to 'keep me safe' from the dangers of the world."

"Fine, I'll give you that. Geez, that sounds a lot like Rapunzel, now doesn't it?"

"Ra-whata?"

"Rapunzel. It's an old folktale, you know. Girl with extremely long hair, locked away in an isolated tower by her mother. Everyone knows that story."

Not knowing how to respond, I just shrug - my go-to gesture for dealing with things like this.

For the first time however, Tooth isn't satisfied by this answer. Instead of simply passing the opportunity to question me, she turns, stopping us from advancing further, and asks, "Why do you do

that?"

"Do what?"

"Justâ€¦ never seem to know anything I'm talking about."

My mouth opens, but nothing but air comes out. I get the same tight feeling in my chest that I had felt the day I had told Hiccup about my mental condition.

"What do you-"

"Oh, don't pull that card on me, Jack," Tooth snaps, genuinely sounding agitated by my lame attempt at dodging the subject. "You know \_exactly\_ \_what\_ I'm talking about, so don't act like you don't."

The look in her eyes - the determination, but sincere need to know what's going on - tells me that she expects an answer, and she's expecting it right now. Knowing her, she's probably had this question pent up inside for the entire time we've been friends, or at least since she's noticed the issue at hand - she just never had the courage or real reason to ask me about it until now.

Why am I so hesitant about telling her the truth? She's my friend, someone who's been here for me this entire time, helping me get out of the house when I desperately needed it. She even did all that without me asking her to, which is more than I could've asked for. Not to mention, she's also the girl I like like and have like liked for some time now, so that must stand for \_something\_. Doesn't she deserve to know the truth, especially now that I know that it's been picking at her all this time?

"It'sâ€¦ it's a little complicated," I tell her shortly, shoving my hands deep into my pockets, giving them something to do. "And a littleâ€¦ wellâ€¦ I don't know."

The stern look evaporates from Tooth's pink eyes then, and the gentle and concerned Tooth I know all too well returns to me. "What's complicated? Jack, you can tell me."

And so I do. As we continue our trek through the maze of trees, I tell her everything that I can remember about the accident and everything that followed: the small details that the doctors filled me in with, and how I lost my memory due to a blunt hit to the head. The day I woke up in the hospital, unaware of who I or anything was. Emma helping me relearn simple words, playing games and testing me to better my memory. My parents, scared and over protective, keeping me bound to the house in attempt to protect me from hurting myself again. I even tell her about the nightmares I've been having constantly since Emma's departure, the terrors of the shadowed figure and how it taunts me and shows me things I never wanted to see.

The entire time, Tooth listens, being unbelievably understanding about everything I'm telling her, not reacting at all like Hiccup had when I had told him. She just nods and asks questions accordingly - that is, until the end. The idea of my dreams containing such horrid images seems to disturb her, and I don't blame her.

"Have youâ€¦ told anyone else about these dreams?" she asks me

apprehensively.

I shake my head, remembering a moment only a couple of days ago when my dad asked me if I was sleeping well, since I had appeared to him to be tired. I had had the opportunity to tell him then, to get these nightmares off my chest, but I chose not to, too afraid of frightening him and mother to the point of making me return to that dreaded hospital. "I'm afraid of how they'd react to something like that. My parentsâ€¦ they may not take it well."

She doesn't say anything at first, appearing to be thinking over my words as we continue to walk up the hill we've stumbled upon. After a moment though, she quietly says, "I can understand that. I promise I won't tell anyone."

I can't help but smile. "Thanks, Tooth."

"I'm sorry though. That you have to, like, deal with all of that. It must be so awful, not remembering anything about yourself or other people."

There's a lot I could possibly say to that - that she's right, that it's awful and I hate it with a burning passion - but I don't. The words, like back in my earlier days of being conscious, just don't seem to come to me.

We eventually arrive to the point Tooth had been aiming for us to reach; it's an overlook, making the entire town of Berk and then some visible at one, overwhelming time. I can see the main downtown area, along with the red letter sign for The Ring sprouting through the surrounding trees. I can see the houses located in the outskirts of town, like mine, and the bay area, boats like tiny models stalling at the docks. The sun has just passed the midday point, and not a cloud in the sky is to be seen. The mountains engulfing the other side of the town tower over it, making the buildings seem so much smaller than they really are.

"This is incredible," I breathe, having never laid eyes on a sight like this before. Who knew that such an ordinary town like Berk could look so beautiful from above.

"It's even better during sunset," Tooth says next to me. "When the sun just hits those mountains over there, it lights up the entire place. I wish everyone could see this."

"Thank you, by the way," I get out. "For, you know, showing me."

I see her smile out of the corner of my eye. "Of course."

We remain up there for some time, taking a seat on a cluster of rocks off close to the jungle of trees. We talk, but about less weighted topics, which I'm relieved for. Being able to just talk with Tooth, none of my problems bringing me down, is such a blessing and I try my hardest to cherish every moment of it.

Eventually, we run out of things to talk about, but continue to appreciate the view as the sun moves lower and lower into the sky. Tooth is perched on a rock only a couple of feet away from where I'm sitting, her dark legs crossed and the loose tank top she's wearing blowing a bit in the gentle breeze. I'm watching the movement of her

shirt, which leads my gaze to wander up to her face, specifically her lips. By noticing the curve of them, the color and smoothness, I can't help but be reminded of the previous night again, knowing that those very lips that I would love to be able to touch touched someone else's not even twenty-four hours ago. My train of thought is broken suddenly though when I look up and see her watching me watching her. I feel my cheeks grow terribly hot as I briskly look away, shifting my sight to the same sky that's been out there since we arrived, trying to appear like I hadn't just been catch appreciating the being that is her as a whole.

She doesn't let me get away with it though.

"Can Iâ€¦ ask you something?" is what she says to break the silence, and I can instantly feel my heart going absolutely \_nuts\_.

Trying to play it cool, I laugh and say, "I don't know. \_Can\_ you?" but I'm sure she can still hear the nervousness in my voice.

"Excuse me for being so, uhâ€¦ well, so blunt, butâ€¦ do youâ€¦ you knowâ€¦ like me?"

Despite the fact that I know \_exactly\_ what she means, since I had had this very conversation just the other night with Hiccup, I play it dumb. "Well, yeah. I meanâ€¦ you're really easy to talk to and fun to be around. Why wouldn't I like you?"

She rolls her pink eyes, smirking to herself as she chuckles, which eases some of the tension I'm feeling in my shoulders and neck. "You know what I mean."

"Do I?"

"Jaaaaaaack."

Suddenly, at realizing the conversation we're having, my head starts to spin and my body feels like both jelly and a rock at the same time. "What do you want me to say?" I ask, unable to look at her anymore. Seeing her face, knowing that she can read mine like a book, is just too much for me to deal with right now.

"I don't know," she says, seeming unnaturally calm. "Maybe the truth?"

"You want the truth?"

"Yes. I want the truth."

"Fine. Okay. Yes. I like you."

"As more than just a friend?"

"Yes. As more than just a friend."

She nods her head once, turning away from me and looking back out to the clear, blue sky, now getting slightly darker due to the sun's position. I try and sneak a peek towards her, to see exactly what her face holds, but doing that would mean allowing her to see what \_my\_ face holds, and I feel too flustered right now to allow that to happen.



"I like you too," she says abruptly, and let me tell you, hearing those words escape her lips caused me to feel the most abnormal and confusing feeling I've ever experienced in my short time of being conscious; half of me is frantic, because \_hey, the girl I like likes me back\_, but at the same time, it's also like \_THE GIRL I LIKE LIKES ME BACK?\_

"Really?" is all I can let out, and it sounds pretty bad, because it comes out as more of a squeak than an actual word.

She giggles, which lessens the tension some more and allows me to relax some. "Really really."

"Soâ€| last nightâ€| with Eastâ€|"

Her head turns in my direction so fast, I'm surprised I didn't hear a sharp snap. "Noooooo, no. No, no, no, no, nooooo," is how she replies, letting out a laugh as she shakes her head, causing her ash colored hair to sway over her bare shoulders. "We're just really good friends, alright? Like, trust me. Last night was weird for the both of us, I'm sure."

"I don't know. He didn't seem to really mind itâ€|"

She's silent to this, but I can feel her still staring at me, her mouth left agape at my remark. After a moment, she quickly turns away, her cheeks turning pink slightly. "Wellâ€| whatever. I don't like him like that, and if he likes \_me\_ like that, thenâ€| well, tough luck, because it's not going to happen."

"Well, \_that's\_ a relief to hear," I sigh, and she leans over and playfully punches me in the arm, shaking her head and telling me that I'm a horrible person.

I look down at my watch then and realize that it's nearly six, which means we have less than thirty minutes to hike our way back down this monster of a hill to my house for me to make it in time for dinner. Tooth doesn't hesitate at getting up, brushing the dirt off her shorts, and leading the way back down to the familiar dirt road.

We talk the entire way down, about what both of us liking each other means, obviously. I ask her what normal people do when they realize there's a mutual attraction to each other, and she explains the concept of something she calls "dating". It's all confusing at first, but she breaks it down, saying that dating someone is the second step of four when it comes to romantic relationships. First, you like a person; second, you date them - assuming they like you back; third, you get something called "engaged" to them; and fourth, you get married. I question her further on this topic, asking her if you have to marry someone you date, which she finds more than amusing, I can tell. She answers each of my queries, doing what Hiccup often does when he's forced to do the same: talking slowly due to thinking over his words. It makes me happy, seeing her take in the fact that, before this summer, I literally can't recall a thing so effortlessly. It makes me wonder why I was ever afraid to tell her in the first place.

By the time we reach the end of the trail, we've come to an agreement. I wasn't very elated about it at first, but the tiny girl

had some pretty solid facts that I couldn't deny and made more than enough sense.

"So we're not going to date?" I ask her, shoving my hands in my pockets as we stand in front of my house. I look into the windows to see if anyone's looking out at us from the kitchen, where my mother is more than likely to be stationed, and luckily no one is.

"Not right now, no," Tooth tells me simply. "You justâ€¦ you seem to have a lot on your plate right now, you know. I mean, you've got your parents to worry about, and getting them to like Hiccup and all your other friends. And then there's just everything you have to make up for because you can't remember anything, and that's just going to make school really tough for you, I can tell."

"And the nightmares," I add on with a sigh.

Her sigh follows mine. "And the nightmares." I look down at my feet, my hands still hidden far in my pockets, but I'm forced to look right at her when I feel her hand take a hold of my chin and maneuver my face to her level.

"If you ever need to talk, Jackâ€¦ you know I'm here, right?"

"I know." To reassure her, I send a smile her way, which she returns.

"Good."

Without warning, she removes her fingers from my chin and kisses me quickly on the tip of my nose. As I'm letting this action set in, the heat on my face becoming overwhelmingly obvious, I notice her face get hot as well along with mine, which causes me to relax; knowing that someone else is embarrassed alongside you always makes you feel better, that I'm certain of.

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Cami and I aren't necessarily successful at finding any dragons, I hate to say. We search high and low on the outskirts of the woods near my house for at least an hour and a half, yet we come up with nothing. We do manage to find a whole log full of lizards though, who all scatter within seconds of being discovered, but that's the closest we got to a real live dragon.

The little blonde's bummed about this, to say the least.

"I could've sworn there would've been more dragons around here!" she says with a huff, placing her hands on her hips. "We used all the right tracking methods. We even did the stupid mating calls just to try and fool 'em! Where are all the dragons!?"

"Maybe it's too hot out for their taste?" I suggest, taking the dragon book from her hands and stuffing it in the back compartment of her turquoise backpack. It's gotten way too hot out here for my taste, that's for sure, and I'm ready to get inside to some nice, air

conditioning.

"Dragons breathe \_fire,\_" she reminds me. "They're immune to the heat!"

"Hm. Good point. But hey! We're humans, so we're not so immune to the heat."

"What's your point?"

"How do you feel about getting some niiiiiice, coooooold milkshakes?"

"Depends," Cami goes, following me as I make my way over to where my bike is waiting for us, leaning up against a tree. "Are you buying?"

"Do you even \_have\_ money on you right now?"

"Oh, I guess not. Looks like you're buyin'!"

Riding on my bike definitely heightens Cami's dampened spirits, which is good, since I honestly don't think I could've stood anymore of her complaining about not finding any dragons. At first, when we had been going from my house to the woods, she had been sitting on my lap as we rode, which made pedaling too difficult for me. We fixed this problem easily by me lifting her up to sit on the handlebars instead, which she was more than excited to try, being the little daredevil she is. So, as we barrel down the streets towards The Ring, Cami's having the time of her life, the wind causing her crazy mane to fly in every direction, and I'm just hoping and praying to every god I know that neither my dad or Bertha happen to see us, for my sake.

The Ring's decently crowded as we roll into the parking lot, me holding onto the little blonde by the hair - she had told me she was going to attempt to jump off the handlebars while we were still moving, and there was no way I was letting that stunt happen. Once we pull to a complete stop and I kick the kick stand down and into position, she's off, faster than I've ever seen even Toothless move, shouting something back at me about wanting every type of sprinkles you can get on her milkshake.

We don't wait to be seated long. Right as we walk up, me telling Cami to behave herself or else no milkshake, I notice Astrid look our way, say something to the waitress she's talking to, then roll over to the hosts stand, where we're standing.

"Well, well, well. Look who it is. You here to cause some trouble?" she greets me as she comes to a quick, professional stop on her skates. She moves her bangs out of her eyes with just a flick of her neck, something she does so naturally and with such grace, it'll always impress me, no matter how old we are or how long her bangs get.

I smile and shrug. "Why else would I be here?"

She rolls her blue eyes as she grabs two menus from the menu basket, and for some reason, the gesture makes me want to grin like an idiot. It feels nice, even natural, being able to joke around with Astrid

again like this. I had been aware of how much I had missed it before we made up last night, but I wasn't aware that I had missed it this much until now.

As Astrid leads us to our table, which is the table I usually sit at of course, Cami decides to speak up and make her presence known, like she always likes to do.

"Are you Hiccup's girlfriend?"

Astrid, appearing to be not only a little startled by the girl's presence, but also the question, stops rolling and stares down at Cami. When her eyes move up to meet mine for an explanation, I dodge them as fast as I can by looking up at the suddenly really interesting ceiling.

"Because, if you are, then I think you deserve better. You're way too pretty for him."

That gets a smile out of the older girl. "You think?"

Cami nods, taking a seat in what's usually my chair. "Oh yeah. He's my babysitter and today's his first day. Honestlyâ€¦ he's going a really horrible job at taking care of me."

"Excuse me, but how am I a horrible babysitter?" I insert as I take a seat in what's not my usual chair. "I've been doing everything you want to do today, despite the lack of appropriate transportation I have. I'm even buying you a milkshake!"

"You didn't find me a dragon," Cami reminds me with a straight face.

Astrid speaks then, directing her question towards Cami. "I'm sorry, but, uhâ€¦ have we met before? I feel like I should know you or something."

"I'm Ze Great Cami Bog, the vilest Dragon Knapper of the North America!" Cami introduces herself without even missing a beat. Her hands fly into the air as she jumps in her seat, making her own cheering and applause sounds as I can't help but let my palm meet my face. No wonder her mother doesn't like taking her out to public places.

Astrid gives me a look that asks Is she for real? I return it with a look that says Just roll with it.

And, being Astrid, she does. "Well, it's very nice to meet you, Cami," she says with a smile. "What can I get for you to eat today?"

"We'll just get two medium chocolate milkshake, please," I tell her, taking the plastic knife Cami's found and is about to use to dissect a sugar packet with. "Extra sprinkles on both, but make hers rainbow and mine vanilla."

"Hey! No! I want to order for myself!" Cami tells me, flicking the sugar packet at me and hitting me square in the nose, which causes Astrid to laugh a little under her breath. Turning towards the older girl, her earlier hostility being replaced with a business-like tone,

Cami says, "I'd like a large chocolate milkshake with rainbow sprinkles, please."

"Medium. She's getting a medium," I correct her quickly.

"Says who!?"

"Says me. I'm buying, remember?"

"You two sound like a married couple, I swear," Astrid laughs as she jots down our orders in her notepad. "I'll be right back with your order, alright? Hold tight." She gives Cami a little wink, then rolls off, dodging other waitresses and tables as she goes.

"I like her," Cami goes once Astrid's reached the ordering station. "Is she your girlfriend? I want her to be your girlfriend."

"Hate to break it to ya, squirt, but she's not my girlfriend," I tell her, playing with the corner of the sugar packet she had earlier thrown at me.

Cami lets out a heavy sigh with a little too much drama behind it. "Not faaaaaaaair."

As we wait for our order, Cami convinces me to play a couple of rounds of tic-tac-toe with her, a game provided on the children's menu that Astrid gave to us. She ends up taking the game too seriously, like she always does, and even comes up with this whole strategy completely dependent on—well, nothing really, to insure her that she'll win every round. Needless to say, I would've won every round if I hadn't allowed myself to lose every once and awhile, just to keep Cami from getting too upset about it. She doesn't seem to notice my obvious mistakes though, excited to see her "plan" working so well. I don't say anything about it; just congratulate her when she wins and tell her better luck next time when she loses.

I wonder if this is what it feels like to have a younger sibling. All my life, I've been an only child, having to learn how to keep myself entertained and out of my dad's hair on my own. People around town have told me that my parents had been thinking about having another kid, but then the accident happened, and all hopes of me having a brother or sister were erased from my mind. It's never once occurred to me that, well, maybe there's still a chance. I feel towards Cami what I think any older brother would feel towards a younger sibling; when she's getting picked on, I want to help her and make the kids messing with her feel bad about it; when she's distraught about something, I want to make her laugh and smile so much, her cheeks and stomach hurt. Granted I didn't really like her to begin with, being the daughter to my dad's girlfriend who I'm still a little iffy about, but maybe this weirdo little blonde girl sitting beside me, going on about how close she was to creaming me in that last round, could be that younger sibling I never had and have always yearned for.

As Cami is deciding on her next all-so important move, which will decide the game and who'll win, I look up to see if Astrid's coming our way with our milkshakes yet. Instead of seeing her though, like I had hoped, I see the last person I wished to bump into not only today, but ever.

Lout comes marching up to our table, his elbow pads and gloves still on from biking here I assume, his eyebrows furrowed and a rock solid expression on his face. I recognize this look all too well. He's here to crack some skulls, or at least attempt to.

"Haddock!" he yells once he approaches the table, slamming his fists down so hard, the condiments jump in the air and spill over. Cami lets out a yelp, dropping the green crayon in her hand, startled at first, then furious at the large intruder for rudely interrupting our game. "I challenge you to a race! Two weeks from now! Noon! The racing grounds!"

"Excuse me?" is all I can respond with.

"I'm challenging you to a race, you numbskull!" Lout shouts, gritting his teeth. "Now be smart and accept it, or I'll pound you right here, right now."

I can hear Cami beside me start to get riled up, and I'm afraid of what she'll say to Lout if she gets the chance. The thought of her becoming involved in this issue is too frightening to me, so I place my hand on her shoulder before she can speak, keeping her in her seat and her mouth shut.

"May I ask exactly why you're challenging me to this race?" I ask with a calm tone. People are looking in on us, due to Lout's stupid little outburst, so I'm trying to play it cool.

"You embarrassed me during that race between me and that white haired freak friend of yours," he enlightens me, his dark eyes narrowed. "You can't just push me around like you did, got it? I'm bigger and better than you, therefore, I'm more superior! You gotta learn your place and I intend on doing just that with making you bite gravel."

Now, I want to say that these threats scare me, like they would any normal person, but then I'd be lying. I've known Lout Jorgenson since basically birth, and since he's been making these hate filled threats towards me ever since we started school, I've become pretty much unaffected by them.

I'm about to tell him to take his ego elsewhere before Astrid gets here and completely chews him out, but Cami beats me to the punch by standing up in her chair so she's the same height at Lout, and yelling, "Hiccup's a better biker than you, you horrible halitosis haddock! He could beat you in a bike race any day with his hands tied behind his back! You don't stand a chance against him!"

And this is exactly why I didn't want her to speak.

Lout appears to be a little shocked to hear such a small girl sending such strong words his way, but it's nothing he can't recover from. He throws me a glare filled to the rim with spite and hisses, "You better shut this little bitch up before I have to."

Something is set off inside of me at hearing him say these words. I'm taken back to nearly a month ago, stumbling upon the scene of Jack covered in blood and Lout referring to him as retard for even trying to beat him. I jump up from my seat, my heart thumping in my chest so hard I can feel it in my forehead, the malicious smirk on Lout's

round face vanishing as he sees me approach him, nearly reaching only his nose.

"I swear to Odin and Thor and every other god that there is, if you dare say something like that to her or any one of my friend again, you will regret it."

Lout only looks threatened by me for a millisecond, but once he finds his bearings, he puffs out his chest, making himself seem so much bigger than he already is. "Oh yeah?" he asks with a smirk. "What'cha ya gonna do about it?"

"Woah, woah, what's going on here?" It's Astrid, thank the gods, that glides into the scene, two milkshakes in her hands as she looks hurriedly between Lout and me, standing nearly chest to chest. She flips her bangs out of her face and gives Lout the stink eye. "If you're causin' any trouble, Jorgenson, I'm gonna have to ask you to please leave the premises. We don't tolerate bullies here."

"Don't sweat it, sweetheart," Lout assures her with a cocky smile. "I was just about to head out, after Haddock here gave me his answer."

Astrid looks between us again, now seeming confused. "His an- what?"

Isn't this what I've always wanted? To be able to bike with the big kids, to have them actually take me seriously. All my life so far has been Hiccup's too weak to bike\_ and Hiccup can't do anything right\_; just all the shallow kids in this godsforken town assuming that because I'm only five six and barely weight the same amount as my bike, that I wouldn't know how to turn a set of pedals properly.

And here I am now, being challenged by none other than Berk's "best biker" who only manages to get across the finish line first because he knows how to ride dirty. Well, Lout may be bigger and stronger and more privileged than me, sure, but there's no way in hell that I'm going to let him one up me in the only thing I'm good at.

"Fine," I say, trying my absolute hardest to look as intimidating as possible. "Two Saturdays from now at noon. The racing grounds."

Lout lets out a devilish smirk at my acceptance to his confrontation. "Good. Get ready to eat my dust, Haddock." He spats down at my feet, his spit nearly missing the toe of my sneakers, and swaggers off like he owns the place. People watching in turn back in their seats, either discussing what they just witnessed or just dismissing it all together.

"Yeah, you better run, you cowardly cowering cuttle-!" Cami starts, but I'm able to slap my hand over her big mouth before she can even finish the insult. When I remove it, she looks up at me, hurt and like she's about to protest at me silencing her, but I speak up before she can.

"Sit down and be quiet," I warn her. "You've caused enough trouble today as is."

"But I was just-"

"Cami, I am warning you."

"I was just trying to help you!"

"Hiccup, what's going on?"

I turn to Astrid, looking like a deer caught in headlights, the two sweating milkshakes still planted in her hands. Taking both of them from her grasp, I place them down on the table, tell Cami to stay put or \_Thor so help me\_, and lead Astrid away towards the kitchens, where we can talk in private.

On getting out of anyone's earshot, Astrid turns towards me and asks, "Did you just do what I think you did?"

"Depends on what you think I did," I say back.

"Lout just challenged you to a race."

"Yes, this is true."

"And you accepted it."

"This is also true."

"You're crazy. You're absolutely insane."

"Please don't pull the whole \_you're gonna die\_ thing on me, alright, Astrid," I beg her, rubbing my throbbing forehead with my fingers. "That's the last kinda stuff I need to hear right now."

"O-okay, okayâ€¦" she whispers, looking timidly down at her roller skates. "I justâ€¦ what are you gonna do?"

"Race him? I don't think I have much of a choice."

"But you \_do\_ have a choice."

"No, Iâ€¦ ugh. No, Astrid. I \_can't\_ back down from this, I just can't," I tell her sternly. When she gives me a curious look, wondering what exactly I'm getting at, I continue. "It's justâ€¦ you told me that I should race against Lout, remember that? Way back at the beginning of the summer?"

"Hiccup, that was before--"

"You said you wanted me to race him so that I could have chance to put him in the rightful place - to knock him down a rung on the stupid, little ladder he stands on. Well, here's my chance. I now have the chance to show him that he's \_not\_ the alpha male, that he \_can't\_ just push me and people like me around just because he's bigger and whatever. I know that racing against him is risky, trust me, I know that \_all\_ too well, but I think that's a risk I'm willing to take to prove myself. I mean, \_someone\_ has to do this, right? And if no one else is going to step up to it, then, well, why the hell not me?"

Astrid continues to stare at me, a look on her face that I can't quite read; it's an odd mixture of both concern and awe, maybe even a



hint of surprise. When she doesn't say anything right away, just continues to study me, I turn away, not being able to look her in the eyes anymore.

"Wellâ€¦ i-if you're gonna do thisâ€¦ I wanna help," I hear her say after a moment. When I look back up at her, she's playing with the end of her braid, twirling it around her pointer finger like crazy, telling me that she's nervous. "Y'know, toâ€¦ to make sure you're prepared for it."

"Waitâ€¦ r-really?" I'm a little taken aback by this offer, since Astrid doesn't seem the type to offer her services to someoneâ€¦ well, to someone like me.

"Well, of course, Hiccup! Don't sound so surprised!" she tells me with a laugh. "I meanâ€¦ you're my friend, andâ€¦ wellâ€¦ I wanna help you in any possible way that I can."

Only one word in that sentence snags into my mind and refuses to leave, causing me to have a hitch in my throat when I speak. "I'mâ€¦ you consider me your friend?" I manage to ask, my mind racing in a countless amount of directions at once.

Astrid almost looks offended as her brows furrows at me asking her this. "Well, yeah, of course I consider you my friend," she tells me simply. "Sure, you're annoying as hell sometimes and you never listen to any advice I give you, but you have your heart in the right place, and quite honestly, that's enough for me."

I can't help but send her the biggest smile, hoping that she can see how much her words actually mean to me. "Thank youâ€¦ thank you, Astrid. Thatâ€¦ that means a lot."

She just shrugs my thankfulness off like it's no big deal, thought I can her trying to hide her smile from turning back towards the rest of the restaurant and away from me. "Yeah, wellâ€¦ you might wanna go drink your milkshake before it's ruined. Or that Cami girl drinks it or something."

"Yeah. I'll go do that." With that, I head over to where I left Cami, sitting by herself, indeed eyeing my milkshake, the little stinker.

As soon as I approach her, she slinks down in her chair, looking like Toothless after I've scolded him for pooping on my bed instead of in his litter box. The action makes me feel horrible for snapping at her earlier, but my mind had been such a mess at the time, too filled with rage and determination to be thinking straight.

"Are you mad at me?" the tiny girl asks, looking down at her lap.

I let out a small laugh, shaking my head as I take a seat beside her. "No, no. I justâ€¦ that guy, Lout. He's just a real problem sometimes. Always gets me in a bad mood."

"Is he one of the guys that doesn't let you race?"

I nod, surprised that she remembers that conversation that we had about a week ago while sitting on the porch of my house.

"Are you gonna beat him?"

I shrug. "I'm gonna try."

That brings a grin to her face as she sits up straight in her seat again. "Can I come and watch? I've never seen a bike race before."

"I don't see why not," I admit.

"Cool! I don't like that Lout guy one bit, and I really, really, really, really, \_reeeeeeally\_ wanna see you knock 'im into the dirt or something nasty like that!"

That manages to get a laugh out of me, the image of me somehow being able to knock beefy Lout off his bike and into the gravel. "I'll see what I can do," I assure her, taking my milkshake and putting the straw to my lips.

#### 14. Listen to Me For a Second

**\*\*Woo! Yeah! Finally an update!\*\***

I don't even have an excuse, guy. Well, besides that this chapter is just super long compared to previous ones, but that's about it. Sorry nevertheless.

Srry about Jack's real name. I know some people were a little iffy about his real name not being Jack, but I just felt that making him have a "birth" name and then a name he chose for himself was important; kinda differentiate the two sides of him from each other, you know?

Thanks for all the lovely reviews and what have you. You guys are incredible for sticking with me this entire time. Like, how do you guys even \_do\_ it?

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I'm lying on the living room couch, a book that lost my interest a long time ago being held over me. Neither of my parents are home, having driven off to work hours ago, and Ms Bennett had come home early to celebrate her birthday with her kids, dismissing Tooth and I of our babysitting duties. I had been a little disappointed with the change in plans, since spending time with Jamie, Sophie, and Baby Tooth has become a distinguished upside to my schedule - playing with them reminds me so much of the days when it was Emma - God, how I miss her - I played with.

Not to mention Tooth always being around is great, laughing every time I lose to Jamie during a video game session and giving me adorable looks whenever I make voices to match Sophie's stuffed animals.

Keeping my affections for Tooth locked away like this is even more

frustrating than when I had just realized I had feelings for her. There are times when we're watching movies with the kids when I steal a glimpse over at her, snuggled up with Baby Tooth under a blanket. At those moments - seeing her sitting there with her head resting on the top of her sister's, her dark legs curled up against her as she absentmindedly toys with her hair - that I want to tell her just how beautiful she is. I don't though, knowing that that would be very out of place, not to mention unprofessional.

Tooth had told me she couldn't to hang out as we leave the Bennett's house. Apparently her mother had asked her for some help with their garden back at home, so she had to obey, which I suppose I understood.

And now I'm here, desperate for a distraction from my boredom and unsure of where to find it.

I'm about to wish again for something -\_ anything - \_to happen to get me off the couch when, like an answer to my pray, I hear three sudden knocks on the front door. The noise scares me, making me drop the book flat on to my face.

It ends up being Hiccup, which catches me completely off guard. Him and my front porch are two things I've never really mixed together before, so seeing it for the first time is a little baffling.

He responds to my perplexed greeting with a smile that can only be described as hopelessly awkward. "Uhâ€| hi," he manages to get out. "I hope your parents aren't home," he continues, looking a little rigid as he reaches up and runs his fingers through his hair. "That'd beâ€|uhâ€| bad."

A laugh escapes my mouth before I can reply. "No, you're all good. They're at work."

"Oh, good," he exhales, letting his tense shoulders relax. "I didn't see any cars in the driveway, but I didn't know if your parents, like, actually \_use\_ the garage or whatever, because my dad definitely doesn't and neither does anyone else in this town really, now that I think about it, so maybe they were just parked in there or-"

"I hate to interrupt this monologue of yours," I break him off with a smirk, "but, umâ€| what are you doing here? Don't you have lawns to mow?"

The freckled boy catches on to my lighthearted jab, and is quick with a comeback, like usual. "Well, \_first of all\_, I get off work at around noon, and if I remember correctly," - he whips out his phone in one swift motion and checks for the time - "it's currently three. And \_second\_ of all, I'm surprised you even know what the word monologue means. Good job."

"Of course I know what it means. It's a prolonged talk or discourse by a single speaker, especially one dominating or monopolizing a conversation."

"Okay, now you just sound like you're reciting the dictionary."

"So?"

"So, I'm no longer impressed."

"I'm sorry, but what are you doing here again?"

The cheeky grin he usually wears when we're messing with one another - and when he's usually one upping me - slowly slips from his face, which in itself tells me there's something wrong.

"Well, uhâ€¦ ha," he beings, reaching up and running his hands through his disheveled hair again. "I was just wondering ifâ€¦ uhâ€¦ if we could, y'knowâ€¦ hang out?"

"Why?"

He lets out a tsk sound, giving me a mocking cynical look. "Wow, do I actually need a reason to hang out with you now? Have you gotten just that popular?"

"You'd be surprised."

"I bet I would be. But seriously. Can I come in or what? It's like bein' in an oven out here."

That's when what's going on finally hits me like a hammer: Hiccup is standing here on my doorstep, completely without consequence, and both of my parents are out of the house and aren't due home for a nice handful of hours. And he's asking me if he can come inside to hang out.

"Sure."

By compete accident, I end up giving Hiccup a tour of the entire lower level of the house. I slid in and out of each separate room, telling my curious friend everything I can about each as he follows closely at my heels. He seems to be being extra cautious as we go from the dining room to the living room, making sure he doesn't leave a mark that would indicate his presence, just in case my parents are able to somehow tell later on.

"Sorry for totally intruding on you, by the way," Hiccup casually says as we're making our way up the stairs to finish off the tour in my bedroom. "I should of called or something beforehand, given you some sorta warning."

"Yeah, a warning for you coming over and ruining my day would've been nice," I throw at him.

"Okay, now you're just being mean, Jack."

"What? I learned from the best."

"Changing the subject," - he playfully bumps shoulders with me in his defense - "don't you have a little sister? Ella or something like that."

"Yeah, but she's away at camp right now. And her name's actually Emma, not Ella."

"Ah. Close, but yet so far."

"Actually, I think Ella was pretty clo-"

"It's a saying, Jack."

"Ooooh."

We eventually make it to my unkempt room, me doing my best to kick all the dirty clothes littering the floor under my bed before he enters after me. I hear him chuckle at I try to scoop some trash sitting on my desk into the trash can, but he otherwise doesn't seem to mind any of the mess I have laying around.

After being in my room for only a series of seconds and taking a peculiar interest in my bookshelf, Hiccup's head turns towards me and states with a disapproving tone, "Dude. You barely have any books."

I peer over at my barren bookshelf behind him to see that he's correct; five or so hardbacks lean against each other, all being supported by my snow globe of the little village imbedded in thick snow.

"Is this a bad thing?" I ask.

"It's a bit concerning, yes." He turns his head away from me and goes back to observing the content of the shelves, moving on to check out my stereo, something my father brought home with him one day and gave to me. He shakes his head and adds, "And will you look at that. Only three CDs in the rack. That's a pretty depressing music collection you have goin' on there."

"I just put those CDs there because the rack looked so empty," I explain to him simply. "They're actually my father's. He's letting me borrow them."

Hiccup takes it upon himself to open the CD case resting on the top of the rack, the plastic casing making two sharp pops as they're pried open with his fingers. He flashes the case over towards me, an unsatisfied expression on his face as he shows me that it's completely empty.

"Well," I go. "That's embarrassing."

"Yeah, I'm definitely gonna loan you some music, for sure," he tells me with a sigh, shutting the case and slipping it back into the rack. "Maybe even some books. Yeah, I definitely have some books you might like."

He goes back to checking out the rest of my room after that, asking me for stories behind some of the more quirky items that are just lying around. I tell him I don't really know the significance of most of them - that I more or less just came with them - and he doesn't say much to that.

"Hey, Hiccup?" I ask as he picks up the hockey puck from my nightstand and throws it from hand to hand. When I see that I have his attention, I continue. "Why are you here?"

He looks a little taken aback by the question, and not in a good way. I had hoped he would take it like he takes a lot of other things - lightly, maybe even a little jokingly - but he doesn't seem to be taking it like that at all. Instead of his usual smirk, ready to deliver a clever comeback, he looks vulnerable, maybe even a little threatened.

"What? Do I need a reason to be here or something?"

I shake my head quickly, wanting him to see I meant no harm by the question. "I justâ€¦ you've never tried to come over before, you know. Why now?"

The familiar look from when I had answered the door makes another appearance on his face. He's suddenly not able to look away from me and his hands won't seem to stop messing with the bottom hem of his shirt.

"You can tell me what's wrong," I remind him, taking a seat on my bed.

"There's nothing wrong," he mumbles back a little too quickly.

"And you seriously think I believe that?"

He looks up from the ground and his eyes meet mine. I can tell by what they hold that he really does want to talk about what's on his mind; he just doesn't know how to explain it.

"Did something happen with Astrid?" I try to get him going. "Did you guys get in a fight orâ€¦?"

"No, no," he finally speaks up, shaking his head. "It'sâ€¦ it has nothing to do with her."

"Then what is it?"

He reaches up and grabs the bridge of his nose, his eyes closed as if he's deep in thought. I want to say something more - to encourage him to explain further - but I'm afraid that I may do just the opposite if I get too pushy.

"It'sâ€¦ it's Lout," he finally says with a sigh following the name. "Heâ€¦ he challenged me to a race, andâ€¦ and I'm gonna have to race him and stuff."

Millions of things I could possibly say go through my mind all at once, but they all move so quickly that I can't decide on which to actually say out loud. He takes a seat on the opposite side of my bed, his shoulders hunched and his head hanging.

"Areâ€¦ are you scared?" I ask.

To my surprise, he actually laughs a little at the question, something I hadn't expected him to do, considering his current state. "Honestly? Not really. I've been putting up with Lout since we were kids, so he really doesn't scare me anymore. I thinkâ€¦ I think I'm more of just nervous about it all, y'know? Likeâ€¦ this is it. This is my one chance to prove myself, and if something goes wrong, then, well, that's it. And knowing me, something is bound to go

wrong."

"That's not always true," I defend him from himself.

He turns to face me, giving me a flat look that I know is him telling me to shut up.

"But it really isn't this whole racing Lout things that's been bugging me lately," he goes on. "Stuffâ€¦ stuff with my dad's been kinda tense lately too."

"Your dad?" I ask, not expecting that to be a reason for him being down. From what I've seen and heard of Mister Haddock, he seems like an alright guy. Yeah, maybe a little impatient and demanding, and maybe not around for his son as much as he ought to be, but I would've never expected there to be any real tension between him and Hiccup.

"He's really hung up about my future," Hiccup explains, sounding a tad bit discontented about the fact. "He really wants me to take over for the family business once I'm done with school, but, it's likeâ€¦ I don't want to, y'know? And though I've told him that several times, he just doesn't seem to really understand where I'm coming from. He thinks that if he doesn't just hand me my future himself, then I'm just gonnaâ€¦ I dunno, waste my whole life away riding bikes and reading books and thinking instead of doing. It's like, you know, I'm a thinker. I like to think about things. It's fun for me. But it's likeâ€¦ he doesn't get that. He's all action, right? And I can tell he wants me to be like that too, y'know, like him, but it's justâ€¦ I'm not. I'm not like that and he doesn't seem to understand that.

"Like today, for example. He came into my room and told me he wanted me to help him clean the garage, right? For the first hour, things were actuallyâ€¦ well, they were actually really nice. We were talking about some of the old stuff we were finding and it was really relaxing, and I liked it. But then he starts asking if I've finished my summer homework yet, which led to him asking me about school and what classes I'm taking next year, and that led to just my life after school in general and what the hell I'm going to do with myself. Next thing I know, we're fighting and he's getting all upset and asking me what's wrong with me, and I feel like I'm about to explode, right? So I just leave. I just grab my bike and leave him there, yelling at me to get back, and justâ€¦ the first place I thought to go to was your house. So there. That's why I'm here. I-I just needed somewhere to go where I don't have to think about my dad and how much trouble I'm going to be in when I get home later today, okay?"

Hiccup lets out a long sigh, like his body's expressing how relieved is it to have finally been allowed to get all that rage out. I'm searching for words to say in response, but all I can concentrate on is the way he's pinching the bridge of his nose again, his eyes squeezed shut and his shoulders tensed.

"That was a really long monologue," I end up saying without thinking.

Hiccup, to my surprise again, lets out a laugh at this. He turns to face me, his freckled skin blotched slightly red. "Puts my earlier

monologue to shame, doesn't it?" he asks with a weak smile.

I nod, returning it.

"Things used to be so different," he tells me, rubbing the back of his neck. "Back when my mom was aroundâ€ she understood, y'know? Like, she got how I worked, why I liked what I liked. She was a thinker too, like me, so she would listen and remind my dad that it's \_okay\_ that I'm the way I am.

"But ever sinceâ€ I meanâ€ it's not that I don't think my dad \_loves\_ me or anything, because I know he does. I mean, if he didn't, he wouldn't be making such a big deal about my future, right? But it's likeâ€ I think he doesn't know how to really show it, y'know? Not like how my mom used to at least. She was always really encouraging and telling me that I was going to grow up and do great things, and my dad doesn't even really bother to ask me how my day went or how I feel or anything. It'sâ€ it's all really frustrating."

"Have you ever thought of just talking to him about it?" I suggest.

Hiccup rolls his eyes at me. "What do you think I've been doing all this time, Jack?"

"No, not likeâ€ no. I meanâ€ okay, soâ€ you've been telling him that you don't want to take over the family business, right?"

"Riiiiight?"

"So, instead of just tell him 'I don't want to take over the family business because I have all this other stuff I want to do with my life', try \_showing\_ him what you mean. Like, explain to him \_why\_ you like biking and reading and thinking. You say he doesn't understand why you like that stuff, and, well, maybe all he needs is for you to \_get\_ him to understand."

"My dad's really close minded," he warns me, looking skeptical at my idea.

"Yeah, well, so's my mother," I remind him. "I've been trying for the last couple of weeks to convince her that biking really isn't that dangerous, and more importantly, that you're not a bad guy who's only here to try and get my back in the hospital, but she just doesn't seem toâ€ wantâ€ toâ€"

As Hiccup's eyebrows furrow at me trailing off, asking me if I'm alright. The truth is, while I was talking, lose ends in my mind start to click with other lose ends that I hadn't thought they would click with. The parallel between Hiccup's father and my mother suddenly becomes obviously apparent - so apparent I want to ask Hiccup to smack me for not seeing it earlier.

"You have to meet my parents," I say in barely a whisper.

Hiccup apparently hears me, because he I hear him say, "You're kidding me."



I shake my head, looking up at him, a bewildered expression on his face. "It's the only way, Hic. I need to prove to her that you're not bad, and you meeting her is the only way to prove that. It's like what I was just telling you. You need to show your dad that what you want to do isn't a waste of time, and I need to show my mother that you're a good guy. She won't listen to me tell her that you are, so the only way to get her to believe me-

"Is for her to meet me in person," Hiccup finishes.

"Exactly."

"Not gonna lie, Jack, but I don't really wanna meet you mom. She seems kinda scary."

I attempt to give him the best puppy dog eyes that I can manage, something Emma used to do to get me to do what she wanted. "Do it for me? Come on, Hic. For \_me\_."

"Ugh."

"Pleeeeeease?"

"Stop making that face and fine, I'll do it."

I clap my hands together out of excitement, jumping up and down a little on my bed, which causes Hiccup to bob as well. He throws me a glare that's only on the verge of bursting into laughter, but that only makes me want to jump harder, so I follow my instincts. Unexpectedly, the small boy dives across the bed like a cat and tackles me off the edge and down to the ground, causing me to let out a startled yelp. As I struggle to get my bearings, I hiss up at him, "That wasn't fair! I wasn't ready!"

"Tough luck!" he laughs as he leaps up off the ground, totally unharmed. "You need to always be prepared for an attack at any time. Gotta live life on your toes, my friend, that's what I always say."

"You're a cheater, that's what you are."

"Oh yeah? Well, there's only one way to settle this." Before I can ask him what he's talking about, he darts out of my room and down the hall, the sound of his feet pounding against the wooden floorboards getting more distant with every thud. As I yell after him where he's going, his distant voice responds with, "Get your bike! We're gonna settle this like men!"

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Getting my feet off the ground and on to my bike's pedals is exactly what I need to lighten my mood. Beating Jack in our race along the outskirts of town definitely helps too.

We mainly glide through the streets after that, stopping every once and awhile to catch our breaths or to allow Jack to check out new

things he's never seen before. When the beating heat of the sun starts to have an effect on us though, we both agree that there's only one place to go to cool down.

The Ring is pretty much deserted as we roll into the parking lot. I see a majority of the waiters and waitresses sitting lazily at unoccupied tables, fanning themselves with the plastic menus as they idly chat with one another. As we hook up our bikes, Jack points out two familiar blondes, both sitting at our usual table

Fish is the one that sees us walking up first, since Astrid has her back towards us, using her hand as a fan to cool herself down. The burly blonde flashes us a bright smile, his thick arm flying up into the air, waving it around frantically like we're not only a couple of yards away. "Hey, you two!" he greets us happily. "It's really hot out here, isn't it?"

"Oooh yeah," I agree as Jack and I take our seats across the small table from them. "I don't think anyone in this town is necessarily built to have to deal with heat like this." Taking a look around the restaurant again, I'm reminded that every chair is empty, all the customers that would normally be resting in them probably safely inside their homes, away from the influence of the weather. "Are you guys even open right now?"

Astrid slowly shrugs her bare shoulders, leaning back in her chair and rolling her bladed feet back and forth underneath her. "Officially, yes. But judging by the customer turn up and staff willingness to workâ€¦ not so much."

"At least you don't have to work out in the heat, like Hic and me," Fish confesses with a sigh. "Mowing today was like torture."

Astrid takes up a defensive look, the annoyance at this comment in her eyes. "Hey, do you see any walls here? I'm workin' outside too, just like you dorks are." Her sharp eyes then land on Jack, sitting quietly beside me, and she sweetly adds, "Not you, Jack. You're not a dork in my book."

Jack sends her an appreciative smile, tipping his head to her. I roll my eyes and flick him on the arm under the table, which I see only makes him smile bigger.

"Anyways," Fish chimes in. "We were just talkin' about you, Hiccup . Before you guys got here."

"Only bad things, I assure you," Astrid tacks on nonchalantly.

"Were you guys talking about the race with Lout?" Jack asks, readjusting his seat in his chair by bringing one his legs up to his chest. "We were talking about that earlier too."

Astrid raises an eyebrow, clearly finding this piece of information interesting. Fish, on the other hand, takes a nervous peek over towards the group of restaurant employees lounging near the ordering station. "Are youâ€¦ y'knowâ€¦ scared?" he asks me in a near whisper.

"Why is everyone \_asking\_ me that?"

"Because you should be scared," Astrid answers, and Fish backs her up by nodding.

"He's more nervous than scared," Jack decides to answer for me, despite the fact that I wasn't going to say anything in the first place. "He's had to put up with Lout for so many years now, so he really isn't scared. Just nervous that he might mess things up."

"\_Really\_?" I go, slumping down in my chair, my face growing hot as I shoot him a look.

Jack looks down at me, confused. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No, you said exactly what needed to be said," Astrid reassures him, a smug grin on her face that makes me wish I could either somehow disappear or make Jack take back what he had said. "I suppose what you really need, Haddock, is a confidence boost."

"Oh, is that right?"

"Yep. And Fish, Jack, and I here are gonna help. We're gonna push you so hard, you're gonna wish you had never taken a seat on that bike of yours in the first place. Isn't that right, Fish?"

Though Jack looks like he's totally on board with this plan - probably happy to hear he'll be able to get some sweet revenge on me from back when I was teaching him to ride his bike - Fish appears a little nervous. "Now, I-I don't think you should put it like \_that\_, Astrid. That's a little-"

"If you wanna beat Lout," Astrid goes on, ignoring Fish's protest to her choice of words, "you're gonna have to be good. And I mean \_really\_ good. Like, mad good."

"Hiccup's already a really good biker," I hear Jack back me up, making me feel a bit better.

Astrid smirks in my direction. "I'll be the judge of that."

It doesn't take us long to leave after our agreement - or rather \_their\_ agreement, seeing as I never actually agreed to it. As soon as Fish finishes the milkshake he had earlier ordered, Astrid goes off to ask her boss if she could get off work early, considering the complete lack of business. Her boss, a hefty woman sporting a name tag that reads Phlegma, just waves her off towards the three of us guys, unhooking our bikes, obviously too affected by the heat to care.

The first place Fish suggests we go is the skate park, but Astrid and I quickly shot that option down. Not only is the skate park too small to race in, but there's a fine chance that Lout and his gang might be already be there, and that's a chance none of us are willing to take.

Going to the racing grounds is also an idea that Jack suggests, him saying that practicing on the actual track I'll have to race on would prove beneficial - a word I didn't even know he knew and am silently proud of that he does. That idea is shot down as well though, considering how long it takes to get there and the current time.

The town of Berk's very streets are our last and only option. Though the roads may be cemented and straight - the complete opposite of the racing ground's - we decide it's better than nothing. .

We lay out a route, starting at Berk High and going around the edge of town. We agree on streets we'll go down, going through the residential part of Berk first, then heading straight through the downtown area, in between City Hall and general stores. It's a clear shot after that, heading towards where my dad works, then towards The Ring, around the corner, and right back to Berk High.

"You ready to feel the wrath of the Deadly Nadder, Haddock?" Astrid asks me as she double checks her brakes and the security of her fingerless gloves.

Assuming that I don't have a say in who I'll be racing against today, I line my front wheel up with hers, spitting back some sort of comeback that I myself can't even make out - the idea that I'm actually about to bike with Astrid Hofferson for the first time in my life is eating up my brain to the point where I can barely think straight. She laughs at whatever I say - thank the gods I don't say something ridiculous - and as Fish takes his place a couple of yards away, raising his hands high above his head, I refocus myself on the matter at hand. This may not be a real race, but I'm not going to take it lightly.

"Alright, you got this, Hiccup!" Jack's voice goes from the sidewalk. I look over to see him standing upon the brick wall circling the school, his hands, like Fish, high above his head. His white face is shining bright as a toothy grin appears, directed towards me. "Make her bite the duuuust!"

Astrid beside me lets out a huff, signaling that Jack may have just been added to her list of dorks.

Now that I think about itâ€¦ I suppose I don't have to take this practice race that seriously.

Fish's large arms come down, and Astrid and I push forward at the same time. She ends up having the advantage though by the way she leans forward before I can, causing her to glide ahead of me in the first couple of seconds.

"Hiccup! Really?!\_" I hear Jack yell from the sidelines.

"Yeah, I know, I know!" I yell back, whizzing away from where he stands and pumping my legs in attempt to catch up with my opponent. So far, this mock race isn't looking too good for me.

Astrid's a lot faster than I anticipated. I try several times to speed pass her, since my bike is more light weight compared to hers, but she's always one step ahead of me. She cuts me off, fakes me out, and makes me feel stupid for not seeing it all coming. Every once and awhile, I notice her look back over her shoulder, a mocking grin plainly visible on her face. I find it hard to be upset at the fact that I'm losing, since I'm honestly just pleased that I'm actually biking with her in the first place - though I know I need to try and beat her, just so she won't get on my case about it later.

Since I'm straggling behind her for the first duration of our race, not only am I able to admire her as she gracefully shifts and moves her body on her sky blue and yellow painted bike, but I'm able to observe her foot and hand work. As we pass by the last house on the street, the fire station coming into view and signaling that City Hall is right around the corner, I notice one of her weaknesses. I have to act on it fast though, because if my timing is off if only by a second, I could jeopardize the entire race.

The turn is upon us, and Astrid does what she usually does by staying on the yellow, dashed line in the center of the road. At all the other turns like this one before, I had copied her, following her motions and staying close to her tail, but this time I branch off. I maneuver myself to the left of her, closer into the turn, and make a sharp curve around the sidewalk's corner. I put everything I've got into my legs, pushing me faster with a burst of energy, and as the both of us come out from our turns, I rocket in front of her, cutting her off and leaving her in my wake. I get the urge to look back as I continue to barrel down the street - to send her the same mocking grin she's been sending me this entire time - but I fight it. I've got to win this race.

Several times Astrid attempts to regain her lead, but now I'm too fast for her. Whenever she's able to get right alongside me, I always push forward, surprising her with my hidden speed. By the time we zoom past a cheering Fish and Jack, both jumping up and down on the sidewalk, hooting and hollering my name, I'm a good fifteen yards ahead of her and my legs are beginning to feel like jelly.

Jack is the one that greets me after I skid to a stop. What I had been expecting to be just a normal high five and a "good job, man!" turns into the white haired weirdo colliding with me into a bear hug that nearly snaps me in half. My body tenses up though, and he lets go immediately, looking worried as his blue eyes grow wide and he asks, "Oh, sorry! W-was that okay? That I did that?" I simply grin up at him and tell him that, yeah, it was okay.

Fish's congratulation is a surprise to me too; he swoops in from below, wrapping his thick arms around my chest, and lifts me clear off the ground in a hug that puts Jack's earlier attempt to shame. "You did it, Hiccup!" he shouts, his grip tightening a bit before clumsily releasing me from his hold. "You beat her, you beat her, you beat her! Oh \_man!\_ What I would do to be able to see the entire race! You probably, like, totally tricked her out and, woah, are you okay?"

I take another deep breath, allowing the oxygen to refill my lungs before answering. "Yeah, yeah. You justâ€¦| \_dang\_, Fish. You don't know your own strength, do ya? You could've killed me in that hold if you felt like it."

The large boy's whole face turns red, but he manages to smile and say that he's sorry and that he's also really proud of me, even if it \_was\_ only a practice race.

"Is it just me," Jack suddenly speaks up as the red in Fish's face fades, "or does Astrid look really, really, \_reeeeally\_ uhâ€¦| oh, what's the word?"

When I look over Fish's square shoulder, in the direction Jack is

pointing, I see a practically steaming Astrid, marching her way in our direction, fists clenched and shoulders rigid. The closer she gets, the clearing her furrowed eyebrows and piercing eyes are, and the more I want to book it in the opposite direction.

"Lethal?" I suggest.

Jack shrugs. "I don't know what that word means."

"Oh boy. Astrid. You need to. Calm. Down." Fish's attempt to sooth her, but fails, despite the fact that he's heroically put his entire one hundred and eighty pounds self in front of me as protection. I guess Astrid is pissed off enough to shove her way right through him though, since the next thing I see is her face right in mine, and she's yelling through her teeth, "How the hell did you do that?!"

I back pedal some, Jack and Fish both proving to be super helpful by scurrying out of the path of the bitter girl, leaving me vulnerable to her attack.

"I had you! I had you, I swear!" Her lips curl in frustration, a look I recognize all too well. The night at Raven Point comes clearly back into my mind; her stance, her anger - it's all the same, and that scares me. We've made so much progress lately - she even considers me one of her friend now. The last thing I want is for all that to go to waste, especially over some dumb race. "And then you justâ€¦ how did you do that? If you cheated, Haddock, by gods, I will-"

"You take wide turns!"

I expect to hear her continue to yell at me, tell me all sorts of things that'll just put us back where we were a couple of weeks ago, but it never comes. Instead, there's just a silence pause, and I think that maybe time is standing still in my favor when I hear Astrid breath out a quiet, "What?"

Putting my hands down warily, seeing her less murderous look, I repeat myself. "Y-you take wide turns. You did it the entire race, even before I got in front of you. I-I was able to pass you by taking a sharper turn and cutting you off. Youâ€¦ yeah. Wide turns. Please don't hurt me."

Her blue eyes continue to stare into me, like she's trying to look into me and see if what I'm saying is actually true. I look over at Fish and Jack for help - anything - but they just shrug in response. Turning back towards Astrid, I find that she's still hard to read, so I don't know if trying to comfort her or just saying sorry would be wise, since this girl could easily snap my arm in half if she really wanted to.

"Youâ€¦ you figured that outâ€¦ just by watching me?" she finally speaks up. Her eyes and lips no longer look as ferocious as before, so I take this as a good sign that it's safe for me to answer.

"Well, yeah," I go. "You can't win a race with just being fast, you know."

"It's true!" Fish chimes in, sensing the hostility level from before going down to where he'd be safe. "You have to know your opponent, see what your opponent sees, and call what they're going to do. If you wanna win, I mean."

"And you got all that just by watching me?" Astrid asks again, her voice more even now.

"Yes, Astrid. I justâ€¦ I watched you and was able to predict what you were gonna do next. It really isn't that big of a deal."

"Yes, it is," she tells me.

"What? Why?"

"Because Lout's painfully predictable."

"Wait? Really?"

"That'sâ€¦ that's actually true," Jack confirms for me as he joins us, his eyes seeming to recall whatever memory he has that supports this claim. "When I raced him, I could tell a lot of the stuff he was going to do before he did it. It was just that one time I wasn't paying close enough attention when heâ€¦ well, you guys know."

"He's a show off, remember?" Astrid tells me. "He likes to make everything he's gonna do known."

"And with your observant eyes and smart brain, you could use that to your advantage, Hiccup!" Fish cheers, slapping me on the back so hard, I almost fall forward into Astrid. "Huh. I guess this race just got easier for you."

"He's still as strong as bull," I point out, which causes Fish's smile to fade a bit.

"Strength isn't everything," Jack reminds me.

"Yeah. We'll see."

"Maybe there's something we could do to your bike," Fish thinks out loud, turning towards said bike and walking towards it. Jack joins him quickly, saying something about booster engines, which makes Fish crack up.

"Anyways," Astrid says, clearing her throat and flipping her unruly bangs out of her eyes. She looks uneasily towards the two other boys, checking out my bike and making outrageous plans for it. "Sorry about, uhâ€¦ allâ€¦ all that. I justâ€¦ you knowâ€¦"

By the stuttering and the not-being-able-to-make-eye-contact-with-me, I can easily tell she really is embarrassed about the scene she had made earlier. I allow myself to smile, assuring her that when I say, "No, it's, uhâ€¦ it's fine," I really mean it.

"You, uhâ€¦ you did well," she goes on, straightening up and sounding more business- and Astrid-like. "You're a lot faster than I thought you'd be, that's for sure. And obviously more skilled."

Any acceptance I could give besides a simple "thank you" seem like a

bad idea in my mind at this point, considering words and I don't work that well together when it comes to girls I like saying I'm good at something. So I settle for a simple thank you.

She shrugs, flipping her braid over her shoulder and acting like it's no big deal, then swoops in and sportively punches me in the shoulder. "You could work some on your, uhâ€¦ your handle work though. Sometimes you were just kinda everywhere. You gotta find one route to follow and stick to it, alright?"

"Alright," I go with a smile, rubbing my shoulder. "I'll keep that in mind."

Astrid goes off to collect her bike, lying discarded in the middle of the street, and Fish follows after her, reciting some more useful biking tips that he thinks she ought to know. Jack is still stationed beside my bike as I approach it, a large, goofy looking grin on his face that kind of freaks me out. I'm about to ask him what he's so smiley about when he, out of nowhere, simply says, "You two are so cute."

I know exactly who he's referring to and she standing no less than twenty yards away, within ear shot. "Ugh, \_Jack,"\_ I hiss up at him. "Justâ€¦ no. Don't go there."

"But you guys are!" he laughs, reaching out and pinching my cheek. I swat his hand away, which just gets another laugh out of him. "Her face turned red when she was complimenting you. I saw it."

"T-that doesn't mean anything."

"Your face is turning red right now."

"That doesn't mean anything either."

"Yes, it does. I looked it up once. Blushing is an involuntary reaction where the capillaries that carry blood to the skin widen, causing the skin to appear red, increasing blood flow to the face, as well as sometimes the-

"Jack, I didn't ask you to explain how blushing works, alright? Now can we please just \_drop \_it?"

He just sends me a smirk, Astrid and Fish now making their ways towards us.

"Whatever you say, Hic."

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Each of us all race a lap against Hiccup again before calling it a day. He easily beats both Fish and me, but Astrid makes it more difficult for him their second time around, their race resulting in a tie. Though Fish and I hadn't been there to witness it firsthand, Hiccup tells me that she had improved on her turns, making them a lot sharper and harder for him to cut off than their first time



around.

As Astrid and Fish bike off in one direction, Hiccup and I go off in the other, towards his house I suspect. I think about asking him if it's alright that I tag along, but judging by the fact that he hasn't brought it up and is looking so casual - like me following him home is what we had planned on earlier today - I assume that it's fine.

His house is definitely a lot smaller than mine, but I suppose that makes sense, considering it's just him and his father living in it. The light, wooden home appears welcoming to me from the outside, all the windows having been propped open and the melody of some sort of strange sounding music I've never hear before leaking through them. Hiccup, on the other hand, doesn't act as though he's as welcomed; when we roll down the driveway, dodging two cars in the process, he looks more on edge than relieved to be home.

"Well, of course Gobber's here," I hear Hiccup mutter under his breath, dismounting his bike and leaning it against the garage door. Since I can't find anywhere else to put it, I do the same.

"Who's Gobber?"

"He's my boss and one of my dad's friends. My dad always invites him over when he wants someone to complain about me with. So I guess I shouldn't be too surprised."

He leads me through a stubbornly jointed gate and into a very diminutive backyard, coated mostly in shrubbery and plants. As soon as Hiccup slides open the glass door on the deck, a wave of abhorrent noise greets us, reminding me a lot of the sound a lawnmower makes when it's run over something other than grass.

"What is that noise?" I shout, covering my ears in attempt to keep it out.

"That, my friend, is the sound of bagpipes," he fills me in. When he sees me covering my ears, he grins and adds, "You'll get used to it, I promise."

We enter the house, and as Hiccup is sliding the door behind us shut, I see the heads of two large men, both sitting in what I assume to be the living room, exchanging words I can't overhear. One I recognize instantly as Mister Haddock, with his heavy, reddened beard and tree trunk thick arms sitting in an armchair next to who I assume is Gobber. The music is so loud, neither of them turn and acknowledge our presence.

Hiccup tip toes past me and towards the two of them, leaving me in the kitchen to observe. He crouched down, first looking towards me and pressing his finger against his lips, then silently scooting himself into the living room behind the back of the couch, so his father won't see him. Once he's directly behind Gobber, he quickly springs up, leans across the back of the couch, and yells into the man's ear, "Why do bagpipers always walk when they play?!"

That gets both the men's attentions, that's for sure. Mister Haddock, who actually jumps in his seat, looks at his son like he's ready to snap, an expression that makes me feel uneasy not only for Hiccup,

but also for myself. Maybe following Hiccup home wasn't the best idea, especially considering the feud going on between him and his father.

Gobber reaction though makes me feel a little better; he seems pleased to see Hiccup leaning over the couch addressing him.

"Why?" the large, blonde man asks with a heavy accent I've never heard before.

"To get away from the noise."

Mister Haddock doesn't even blink at the joke, which causes the unsettling feeling to return to me. Gobber though lets out a laugh that quite literally shakes the entire house it's so loud. As he's telling Hiccup through chuckles that "Aye, that was a good one, laddie," he looks over Hiccup's shoulder towards me, still stationed in the kitchen. "Say," he goes with a smile that reveals to me his missing bottom tooth, "you're the boy that's livin' in ol' Mildrew's house, aren't ya? Overland, right?"

As I nod my head, walking into the living room to join the three, Mister Haddock turns in his seat. Now that the two men's eyes are fixed on me, I feel not only unsettled, but also incredibly out of place - more so than I thought I'd be. From how Hiccup put it earlier, Gobber is an old family friend, which means that him and Hiccup probably have a history. The only relation I have to either of these men is that one is the father to my best friend, while the other runs the business that provides care of my family's yard. And not to mention the fact that I've never actually been in the presence of either of them until now.

I stuff my hands into my pockets, needing to give them something to do to ease the awkwardness I'm feeling. I suppose Hiccup notices this, because he says, "Gobber, Dad. This is Jack. He moved to Berk at the beginning of the summer. Jack." He turns back towards me, sending a small, supportive smile my way. "That's Gobber, and that's Dad."

I remove one of my hands from my pocket to give them both a wave. "Hi, Gobber. Hi, Dad."

That gets another good laugh out of Gobber, and I even hear Hiccup chuckles a little beside me. Mister Haddock, however, doesn't seem at all impressed; all he's doing is staring at Hiccup, who's refusing to look in his direction, I can tell, probably thinking of all the things he wants to say to his son right now, but can't.

"You stayin' for dinner then, Jack-o?" Gobber asks without missing a beat, getting up from his seat on the couch with a grunt. "I brought som' food ova, and there should be enough for all of us."

It's then that the thought of my parents - both due home any time now - enters my mind and the absolute horror I know my mother will feel when she sees that I'm not there. I can't say no to this meal though, not now that Gobber's pulled out some delicious looking meat that smells just so good. Adding on that Hiccup has this look on his face that's encouraging me to stay, probably wanting my protection from having to confront his father, how could I possibly say no to the invitation?

The four of us all eat together at the wooden table in the kitchen, at first in silence, but then Gobber takes it upon himself to interview me on what seems to be like every aspect of my life. He asks me where I'm from, what my parents do, and I try to the best of my ability to give him truthful answers. I have to improvise as I go though, since I honestly don't know where I lived before moving to Berk or what my parents do for a living. I begin to feel more and more comfortable in my surroundings with the more harmless questions Gobber asks me. Hiccup, to his own credit, even helps ease the pressure some too, inserting his two cents and just making me feel like I belong here. I'm not sure if he's meaning to do it or it's just natural for him, but nevertheless, I'm thankful.

Mister Haddock doesn't say much the entire meal. Gobber's the one going on and on, asking me questions and telling these outrageous stories that make him break out in his thunderous laugh and make Hiccup just roll his eyes. All Mister Haddock does is eat his food, every once and awhile looking up from his plate to peer over at Hiccup sitting across the table from him. Hiccup's still refusing to meet the man's eyes though, so as the dinner goes on, Mister Haddock seems to be getting more and more impatient. I want to say something, to tell Hiccup to just \_talk to him \_already, but I feel like that'd be out of place for me to do.

Eventually we finish eating, and Mister Haddock tells Hiccup in this silent yet forceful way that he's going to have to be the one to do the dishes, since he has something he needs to show Gobber before he leaves. Hiccup, thankfully, doesn't protest and gets right to it, me volunteering my help only a moment later, since washing the dishes is my job at home too. As I hand the first dish to Hiccup, I notice Gobber and Mister Haddock disappear into the garage, talking in lowered voices that make it to where I can't apprehend what they're saying.

The two of us talking artlessly as I pass him dishes and he tries his hardest to scrub the sticky meat plastered on to the plates off. I ask him how long he's known Gobber, and he tells me since before he was born, which I tell him doesn't make sense, to which he just rolls his eyes to. He explains to me that Gobber and his dad have been best friends since high school, and that the two are, to a certain extent, inseparable. Mister Haddock helps Gobber out with running his many businesses around town, while Gobber helps Mister Haddock with raising and understanding Hiccup.

"He wasn't around as much as he is now when I was younger," Hiccup tells me as I pass him the large mug that Gobber has been sipping out of earlier. "It was afterâ€¦ well, after Mom died that he started coming over more often. My dad was a real mess afterwards, y'know, so Gobber kinda took me under his wing for a while. Even after Dad put himself back together, Gobber just stayed around, helped raise me, in a weird kinda way."

"Soooo, what? You have two dads?" I ask him.

He splashes some water my way, a couple of drops managing to land on my shirt before I'm able to dodge them. "Yeah," he tells me with a smirk. "Something like that."

"That must've been really interesting for you growing up."

"Let's just say that I've been given two very different sex talks, alright?"

I furrow my brows at the unknown phrase. "Sex talk?"

Hiccup's green eyes become wide as he says, "Ooooooh noooooo."

"What? What is it?"

He shakes his head, turning his attention back to his dish washing. "Nope, nope, nope. I'm not gonna be the one to tell you what that's all about. Nope. No way. I'll leave that to your parents."

Once all the dishes are cleaned and stored safely in the drying rack by the sink, Hiccup asks me if I want to see his room, to which I accept.

"Since your room was pretty messy, I'm just not even gonna worry about you judging the state of my room, alright?" he asks as he leads me up the stairs. I'm about to ask him what he's talking about, but when both walk through the threshold of his room, I understand exactly what he meant.

His room is a lot like him. I can't necessarily say how it's like him, but there's just some sort of charm to it that makes me feel like this is the kind of room that Hiccup would have. The forest green painted walls are covered head to toe in posters and sketches, most of them pinned up above the messy desk in the corner. His bookshelf puts mine to shame with how many books he has stored in its selves; a pile at the base of the shelf, stacked at least five books high, has formed, since there's no more room in the actual shelves. His bed is unmade - something my mother would explode on me about - and clothes and trash litter the wooden ground.

"This room suits you," I tell him as I notice the small height measurements etched into the frame of the closet door. The most current one is marked at five six, and a darker mark is etched a good handful of inches above it; it looks about the height of Lout, not going to lie.

"Uhâ€¦ thanks?" is all he says in response before making his way over to his bookshelf. As he's going on and on to me about some of the books he was thinking of letting me borrow, I hear a small noise come from behind me. I turn, not seeing anything at first, then I peer down and come face to face with a black cat, it's piercing green eyes staring observingly back up at me.

"Hi cat," I say to it, crouching down like I do when I'm addressing Sophie or Baby Tooth, extending my hand down to pet it on the head.

"Oh, that's Toothless," I hear Hiccup tell me, not even bothering to turn away from his bookshelf. "I wouldn't try touching him if I were you. He's kinda weird about strangers."

I pull my hand back just in time, for this Toothless cat - who actually has teeth, oddly enough - pounces forward and tries to take a snip at my fingers. "Thanks for the warning there," I mumble, getting back up.

Hiccup says something in response, but I don't hear it, because the framed picture on the nightstand grabs my attention. As I get closer, I'm about to see that it's of a man, broad shouldered and as big as a mountain, standing alongside a woman with auburn hair, much smaller in comparison to him. In her arms is a small boy, matching colored hair and large green eyes, freckles sprinkled all over his round, smiling face.

"Is this you?" I ask.

I hear Hiccup turn, and though he doesn't say anything for a beat, he eventually gets out, "Yeahâ€¦ I found that while I was cleaning out some cabinets downstairs the other day. Totally forgot it existed."

I study the woman carrying the younger him. "And this is your mother?"

He doesn't say anything, just nods.

"You look a lot like her," I tell him with a smile.

He tries to smile back, but I can tell he's having a hard time. "Yeah... I used to get that a lot."

I want to ask what he means by "used to", but then I think what those words mean and stop myself. "Used to" is past tense, which means that, whoever his mother is - or, I suppose, was - she's no longer around. He's hinted at her absence a couple of times today too - when we were in my room earlier - but by the way he doesn't elaborate on his own, I don't think he necessarily wants to talk about it. Maybe he will some other time, when he's ready.

Instead, I ask him about Toothless, who's perched on the pillow of the bed now, giving me an baneful stare that warns me to get nowhere near him or else. Once Hiccup takes a seat on the bed though, the cat joyfully jumps into his arms, nuzzling his head against the boy's chest, a series of purrs escaping his mussel. Since he's preoccupied by Hiccup's coddling, I take that as my chance to steal a seat beside him without getting bitten or scratched.

We talk for a while, mainly about the practicing we did earlier today and the big race coming up in just a week. The more we talk about it, the more comfortable Hiccup seems to be getting with the idea of racing against his cousin. I just hope the entire time we talk that I don't slip up and say something to him that'll cause him to take a step backwards. With the race so close, that's the last thing he needs.

Eventually I have to leave, despite the fact that I don't want to. His clock reads seven thirty, which is well after my mother and father get home from work, so I know I'm already going to be in a lot of trouble when I walk through the front door.

"Just go straight to your room," Hiccup tells me as we bound down the stairs, five books he's letting me borrow cradled in my arms. "If they try talking to you, just pretend you didn't hear them. That always works for me."

Right as I'm about to tell him that that doesn't sound like a very well thought out plan, a deep voice says, "I'll be sure to remember," before I can. As we reach the ground floor, Mister Haddock is sitting in the same armchair as before, flipping through what I think Emma told me was called a newspaper. I can see him sending Hiccup a look I can't read from the corner of his eyes, and that uneasy feeling from earlier comes back to my stomach.

"Jack's going home," Hiccup tells his father quickly, a squeak escaping somewhere in there.

Mister Haddock looks towards me, and though I hadn't been expecting anything from him on the news of my departure, he nods his head once and says, "It was nice meeting you, Jack."

"Uh, yeahâ€¦ it-it was nice meeting you too, Mister Haddock," I manage to get out. I feel Hiccup grab my arm and begin pulling me towards the front door, moving quickly as to get out of the same room as his father as soon as possible.

"Is everything going to be okay? I mean, when you go back in there," I ask, grabbing my bike from where I left it against the garage door. The white van, which I assume was Gobber's, that had been parked in the driveway upon us arriving is gone, leaving only Mister Haddock's car and our two bikes.

"Yeeeeeah, I'll be fine," Hiccup assures me, though the tone in his voice tells me otherwise.

"Talk to him," I remind him, trying to sound stern, but coming off more timid. "The more you put this off, the worse it's going to be."

"Yeah, yeah. Okay, Oprah."

"Who's Oprah?"

Hiccup gives me a blank stare, sighs, and says, "Justâ€¦ I'll see ya whenever, alright, Jack?"

Though this is definitely not the note I would like to leave on - him being annoyed with me for being pushy about his father - I don't protest.

"Yeah. See ya."

The entire time I bike back home, the street lights all steadily beginning to flicker on above me as I pedal down the street, I can't help but think about Hiccup's mother. I don't know anything about her - all I know is what she looks like, really - but Hiccup had made it sound like he had had a very deep connection with her while growing up. And even though she's... well, wherever she is, he still harbors that same connection with her, despite her being gone.

I wonder how I would feel if my mother were to be absent like that. Would I feel the same heaviness that Hiccup feels towards his mother no longer be around? Would I miss my mother like he does his?

The first word that comes to mind is "no", and that scares me.

I shouldn't feel that way, this much I know. A mother is supposed to be someone that loves and cares for you, someone you can always go to when you're in distress. Sure, sometimes they can cause you some grief, but everyone has the potential of doing that.

I have to fix this gaping hole that's formed between my mother and me, not just for me, but also for Emma's sake. I want her to come home in a week to a happy home, not a house split in two, forcing her to choose between her own mother and brother. I need to take my own advice and talk to her about the issue at hand, make her see my side of the story and finally get this whole thing all figured out. A relationship with my mother is important - Hiccup has shown me that much - and I need to take advantage of the fact that I actually have one to be there for me.

I don't even bother putting my bike in the garage on arriving home. I lean it near the front door and go straight inside, readying myself for the hurricane that I know is about to come crashing down on me.

As I close the door, placing the books in my arms down on the stairs, I hear the sound of a chair scrapping against tile floor from the kitchen, followed by the sounds of hurried footsteps coming my way. My mother is the one that comes marching into the foyer, and as I open my mouth, ready to explain myself, she yells, "CHRISTOPHER OVERLAND, WHERE ON EARTH HAVE YOU BEEN?"

Saying I'm surprised by the foreign name being used to address me would be an understatement. I can tell my mother is just as stunned by it as I am, but she doesn't let it phase her; she continues to hold that same solid glare, burning into me with each step she takes in my direction.

"Iâ€¦ I was at Hiccup's," I tell her plainly, trying my hardest to stand my ground.

A horrified expression replaces her hard look. "Youâ€¦ you wereâ€¦ J-Jackâ€¦ how \_could\_ \_you? We \_trusted\_ you not to leave, and you justâ€¦ youâ€¦"

"I \_had\_ to leave," I try to tell evenly, though I can hear the shaking in my voice. "I couldn't justâ€¦ I'm sick of being locked away in this house, okay?"

"We let you leave to go babysit the Ms Bennett's children though."

"That's not enough. Iâ€¦ I wanted to see my friends."

"But Jackâ€¦"

"No. Don'tâ€¦ justâ€¦ listen to me for a second, alright? I know you think that keeping me locked away from him is going to solve all your problems, but it isn't. If anything, it's making things \_worse\_."

My mother shakes her head, a saddened frown on her face as she closes her eyes like she can't believe what she's hearing. "Jack, stop it. You don't know what-

"I'm justâ€¦ I'm going crazy here, alright? I don't know who I was

before all this mess, but I know that he and me weren't meant to be locked away like this. We were meant to go out and talk and have fun and make friends."

"Jack-

"\_Listen\_. I \_know\_ you're just trying to keep me safe, and I completely understand that, trust me, I do. But you need to realize thatâ€¦ wellâ€¦ by doing that, by keeping me away from every dangerous person and thing, you're not helping me. One day I'm going to leave. I mean, in just a month or so, I'm going to have to go to school \_all by myself\_, and I won't have you to watch over me every second of the day. Right now, by hanging out with Hiccup and Fish and Astrid, I feel like I'm not only learning how to take care of myself, butâ€¦ but I'm also making \_friends\_."

Something at hearing this makes her hard face soften, even if it's only by a little. I decide to keep trying to get through to her, since I feel like I've \_finally\_ hit a cord.

"I have \_friends\_, alright? I wasâ€¦ I had been so scared about making friends when we first moved here, becauseâ€¦ well, who would want to be friends with someone as weird as me, right? But look! People actually \_want\_ to be my friend! Astrid told me she doesn't think I'm a dork, Fish laughs at a lot of my jokes, and Hiccupâ€¦ geez, he calls me his \_best friend\_! These three actually like having me around, and you're justâ€¦ you're telling me that I need to just give up on all of them? Just because of some stupid accident that only left a scar on my cheek?"

"It could've been worse," my mother tells me, only it's in a whisper so weak I barely hear it.

"But it wasn't," I remind her. "You're completely making what happened seem so much worse than it really was."

"I just don't want to lose you, Jackâ€¦"

That's when I see the first tear fall, making its way down her cheek and getting whipped away by her shaking hand. As her shoulders tremble and she wraps her other arm around her stomach, acting as if she's attempting to keep what she's feeling inside of her, I realize that it isn't Hiccup that makes her so upset, but the thoughtâ€¦ well, the thought of losing me.

What have I done?

"You're not going to lose me," I tell her calmly, approaching her and resting my hand on her shoulder, trying to stop them from shaking.

"How can you even promise me that?" she whispers. I can tell by the look in her foggy eyes that, more than anything right now, she's just plain exhausted.

"I can't," I admit. "But you can't keep me here like this. I have to go out and live."

She seems to be thinking this over, not looking up at me or at her own feet, but rather somewhere in between. She bites her lower lip, a



pool of tears welling up at the rim of her eyes. Seeing her cry like this is killing me, and the fact that I think she's finally seeing my side of the argument is making this even harder for me to watch. I'm about to reach forward and wrap her into a hug, in an attempt to comfort her, but \_she's\_ the one that moves first. As I feel her thin arms tighten around my waist, I'm surprised to see that she stands an entire head shorter than me - something that had never registers until now.

"I'm so sorry, Christopher," I hear her say into my chest through her tears.

I tighten my hold around her, closing my eyes and burying my face into her shoulder.

"It's okay, Mom."

## 15. I Remember Everything

**\*\*Yeah, don't worry, this story's still a thing that's happening.\*\***

I'm not even gonna try and make excuses for why updates are so far apart now.

I've gone back and changed a couple things in the story, since user R-dude was kind enough to send me some really constructive criticism (thank you again so much for that, it was really appreciated). A lot of the change happened in chapter eleven, I believe. If you feel like rereading that real fast, see what I changed up, feel free to do so. I actually kinda encourage it.

So thank you all so much for the kind reviews and stuff! You guys are such great people and I love hearing from you all!

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As I mow lawns the next morning, my mind keeps wandering back to the nagging thought of Jack more than likely being grounded for life again. Though we had both known he wasn't allowed to leave his house - especially not with \_me\_ - he did it anyways, and now he probably has to pay the price.

I shouldn't have gone over there in the first place, no matter how right it had felt at the time. I've probably just caused Jack's parents to take a large step backwards when it comes to trusting their son, which is the absolute last thing that poor kid needs right now.

After Fish drops me off at my house, having spent the entirety of the car ride trying to assure me that everything with Jack's going to be alright, I walk into my house to see Cami sprawled out on the couch, watching the television with Toothless resting beside her. She merely glances at me through her wild mane of blonde hair, framing her round face in a chaotic kind of way, and then turns her attention back to

the screen.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, slipping off my shoes and kicking them to the side.

"Last minute babysitting," she tells me simply. "Hope you didn't have any plans today, 'cause they're now officially \_cancelled\_."

I make my way into the living room and slump down next to her, feeling a wave of relief come over at me as I finally relax my body for the first time today. Toothless, who greets me with a head nudge and a soft meow, crawls on to my lap and curls into a small, black ball. I lean my head that feels like a sack of rocks against the back of the couch as I run my fingers down his spine and let out a much needed sigh.

And then the phone rings.

Cami moves so fast that, by the time I've opened my eyes, she's already taken it upon herself to climb onto the kitchen counter where the phone jack is located and pick up the phone, saying into the receiver, "Yes, hello. This is the Haddock residence. What do you want?"

Toothless yowls along with me as I let out a groan. "Camiiiiiii, I swear to every god I know-"

"Hey, it's your girlfriend," the small girl informs me, attempting to whisper so only I can hear her, but failing miserably at it. "That Asturd girl."

Reaching out my hand, I signal for her to pass the phone to me. She says something about me having to fight her for it, but when I threaten her with Toothless' claws, to which he confirms with a hiss, she reluctantly hands it over.

"Did she really just call me Asturd?" is the first thing I hear Astrid say. "I don't think I've ever been called that before."

I laugh, telling Cami with my eyes to get her butt off the kitchen counter. "And I believe that. You'd probably kick their face in if someone were to ever call you that."

"And that is so true. You're beginning to know me too well, Haddock. It's concerning."

Cami shakes her head at my request for her to get down, so I pick up Toothless and throw him softly onto the kitchen counter beside her. Before he can even land all four paws onto the linoleum surface though, Cami's already sprung off the counter and retreated into my dad's bedroom, slamming the door shut behind her.

"So, what's up?" I ask, giving Toothless an approving grin, to which he sits and meows happily in response to.

"Oh, not much," Astrid tells me simply. "I was just wondering if you have anything planned for the afternoon. If not, I thought we could, I dunno, maybe go hang out with Jack and that Tooth girl. Speaking of which, where in world did she get a nickname like Tooth? Was that one of Jack's or-"

"Wait, wait, wait," I stop her at hearing Jack's name. "Jackâ€| heâ€| he's \_talked\_ to you?"

"Well, yeah," Astrid says, making it sound like no big deal. "He called me a couple hours ago, asked if you and I would like to join him and Tooth and some kids they're babysitting on a hike or something."

"So wait. He's \_not \_ grounded?"

"What? \_No\_. Why would be- oh gods, Hiccup. What did you two do?"

"No, no, no. We didn't do anything. I justâ€| nevermind."

"Yeah, good, 'cause I don't even want to know. Anyways. Are you in or what? 'Cause if you don't join me, then I probably won't go. I'm not particularly close with either of 'em, and having to deal with three little kids doesn't sound that great if I don't have your moral support."

"He can't go!" a new, squeaking little voice breaks into our conversation all of the sudden. "He's babysitting \_me\_ today and can't go anywhere if I don't go with him! So there!"

"Oh my gods, Cami," I groan. "Are you using the phone in my dad's bedroom?"

"â€|no."

"Well," Astrid continues on, "if you wanna tag along, Cami, I don't see the harm in it."

"You're saying that \_now\_," I mumble.

I swear I hear Cami growl into the receiver before saying, "Shut up, Burp."

"And from what Jack told me," Astrid goes on, "there's gonna be some kids around your age with us, so you can hang out with them, keep yourself busy."

All of the sudden, a bush of blonde hair comes running out of my dad's room, bare feet slapping loudly against the wooden floor and a phone in hand. Cami hurls herself onto the couch beside me and begins jumping up and down with all her might, chanting into the receiver, "Can I go, Burp? Can I can I can I can I?"

"Cam, I'm \_right\_ \_here\_," I tell her, reaching out and trying to grab her legs to stop her from jumping. "You don't have to talk into the phone anymore."

"CAN IIIIIII?"

"Fine! Yes! You can tag along."

She stops bouncing and throws her hands into the air in success, nearly letting the phone fly out of her grasp and into the wall. Jumping down from the cushion, placing the still connected phone on

the coffee table, she then runs off into the foyer, yelling back at me, "I'll get my shoes and Dragon Book! Maybe we'll see a dragon while we're out there! That's be so \_cool!\_"

"It's gonna be a mistake allowing her to tag along, isn't it?" I hear Astrid ask once Cami's gone.

"You have no idea."

I hear her let out a warm laugh that reminds me of yesterday when we raced against each other for the first time, which make me smile. "Well," her voice goes on. "I guess I'll meet you twoâ€¦ how about at my place? I still gotta unload the dishwasher before going out, so that'll buy ya some time."

"Alright, yeah. Sounds good," I tell her. "I'll, uhâ€¦ we'll see ya soon."

"Yeah. See ya, Hic."

Cami and I are out of the house in record time, mostly on Cami's account for being so over eager to go dragon hunting again. As I help her up onto the handlebars of my bike, planting one of my old, forgotten helmets firmly on her head, I remind her of our earlier dragon hunting expedition and how unsuccessful we were, but I don't think she hears me, considering she's so pumped.

Astrid's waiting on the seat of her bike as we roll up her street, her gear on and all ready to go. I'm about to yell out to her when, before I can, she starts pedaling towards me at a rather uncomfortable speed. Right before she hits me though, she swerves, only just missing my front tire by a good couple of inches, then starts pedaling off down the street the opposite way.

"I think she just threatened you," Cami tells me.

"Yeah, I think she did too."

"And what are you gonna do about it?"

"Hang on to something."

I don't win Astrid's and my little race around the block obviously, considering I have Cami sitting in front of me with no real way of hanging on. The small blonde does get a really big kick out of me breaking fifteen miles per hour though, the speed I usually go with her as a passenger.

After a while, Astrid sees that I'm really not trying that hard to beat her, because of my extra load, so she slows down and comes back to join us. She swerves towards me as she arrives again, catching me off guard and causing me to do the same, only away from her. I shoot her a look, trying to remind her that I have a ten-year-old with no seat belt riding with me, but she only laughs and playfully sticks her tongue out at me before rocketing off in front of us again.

"I think she just flirted with you, Burp," Cami tells me matter-of-factly.

"No," I tell her. "She was justâ€¦ fooling around."

"I dunno. That seemed like a real girlfriend-like thing to do."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"If you say soooooo."

After Astrid leads us to the outskirts of town, we eventually run into Tooth, sitting on the side of the road with two little girls. I recognize the smallest one as Sophie, a pair of fairy wings strapped onto her back and what looks like a juice box straw stuck in between her lips. The other little girl though, who's a spitting image of Tooth, only younger, doesn't look familiar and quickly goes to hiding behind Tooth when she sees us coming. This make the older girl look over her bare shoulder to see us, which causes her to smile and wave, getting up from the ground to greet us as soon as we start dismounting our bikes. Before Tooth can even get a word out though, Sophie is bounding towards me, her wings flapping behind her as she chants, "Robot, robot! Beep boop beep!" Once the small girl who's only about a third of my height is standing in front of me, she bends down and starts poking my prosthetic leg, still making little robot sounds.

Tooth starts apologizing instantly as Astrid just laugh at the sight, Cami asking from beside me, "What is she doing?".

"She's just greeting me in the proper robotic fashion," I say back, crouching down to the little girl's level. I poke her on her little, button nose, making a little "beep" sound as I do so, and that makes her start giggling like crazy. Before I can say anything else or even get up from kneeling, she up and skipping over to join the other little girl, who I notice is also wearing fairy wings on her back.

"Thank you two soooooo much for coming," Tooth tells us, giving both Astrid and me a pleasant smile that tells us she really means it. "Jack and I don't normally take them out while babysitting, but it's just such a beautiful day. We couldn't keep them locked way inside all day, you know."

"Tell me about it," Astrid says from beside me. "This one here was gonna waste today bein' inside, no doubt, so thank you for inviting us." She nudges me in the side, and I roll my eyes, lying and saying that that isn't true.

I'm about to change the subject and ask where Jack is, when - speak of the devil - the white haired weirdo walks out from between the trees with Jamie at his side, both of them carrying what look like a bunch of sticks in their arms.

"Hi, Robot! Hi, Robot's friends! We got walking sticks for everyone!" Jamie announces with a proud grin. The young boy marches up to us, making a point to jump on every rock in his path, and starts testing out which sticks would work best with Astrid's height.

"Can I have an extra tall one?" Cami asks as he passes her one that would suit her perfectly.

Jamie furrows his brow. "Why?"

"Wizards like Gandalf always have staffs that are extra tall, and I wanna feel like a wizard."

"You believe in \_wizards?\_" Jamie asks, and when she nods, he's beaming.

After everyone gets a walking stick and all shoelaces have been tied, Tooth and Astrid lead our little party into the woods, starting down a manmade path cutting in between all the trees and shrubs. I can overhear them talking about the kids, Tooth telling Astrid how Sophie and Baby Tooth - the little Tooth look-alike girl - have the tendency to disappear sometimes, so we'll need to keep an eye on both of them. The two said little girls are skipping close behind them, hand in hand and singing a song with words that only little kids must understand, their fairy wings flapping in unison. Behind them are Cami and Jamie, walking side by side as well and sounding like they're in a deep conversation about which wizard is better, Gandalf or Dumbledore. That leaves just Jack and me to take up the rear.

I point up at his oddly shaped walking stick, getting his attention. "I like your stick."

He looks up at it, like he's making sure it's still the same stick he had found earlier, and then looks down at me with a smile. "Thanks. It's kind of weird, but I thought it looked cool."

"Looks kinda like a shepherd's crook."

"What's that?"

"A shepherd's a sheep herder," I tell him. "They had these sticks they always walked around with and stuff. They were all hooked at the end, like yours there."

"Ah. Too bad I don't have any sheep to herd."

"Of course you do." I point towards the four children in front of us.

"Uh, last I checked, those were \_children\_, Hic, not sheep."

"Sheep. Children. They're practically the same thing."

He lets out a laugh at that. "If you say so."

I shove my hands into my pockets, watching Cami ahead of me reach to grab her Dragon Book from her backpack to show Jamie its contents, no doubt. From the looks of it, Astrid and Tooth are no longer talking about the kids, but rather about whatever teenage girls talk about, Sophie having migrated into Astrid's arms, and Baby Tooth's hand into Tooth's.

"So, some stuff happened last night," I hear Jack say from beside me.

"Oh?" I ask, feeling my entire body tense up.

"Yep."

"W-what happened?"

"Well, when I got home last night, my mother was really, \_really\_ upset about how I'd snuck out."

"Hm."

"She said something about me making it to where she'd never be able to trust me again."

"Ah."

"And I think I overheard her talking with someone on the phone this morning about hiring someone to assassinate you or something."

"Wait, \_what?\_" I stop in my tracks, and when Jack looks back to see my horror stuck expression, his face cracks and he bursts out laughing. Getting what's going on, I send him a stink eye and hit him as hard as I can in the arm, which ends up not being all that hard, since he barely even flinches at the impact.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Jack says through his laughs, trying to catch his breath. "I saw the opportunity and I had to take it."

"Do you even know what assassinate means?" I ask, trying to ignore the hot redness now creeping on to my cheeks.

"Of course. It means-"

"Nuh-uh. No word-for-word Dictionary definitions."

"Ahhh, that's not fair."

"Yeah, well, life's not fair. Soâ€¦ yeah."

We reach a stream at this point, and go ahead to help Astrid and Tooth get the kids across without them getting too wet. Jamie and Baby Tooth are corporative with the task, following Jack's footsteps across the boulders dotting the water. Sophie doesn't even get close to getting wet since Astrid decides to just carry her across. It's Cami though - of \_course -\_ who "accidently" missteps and gets her sneakers drenched, just to be the little problem she is.

After everyone's safe across the stream, we continue on our way down the path, me being the one who has to carry Cami's soaked shoes as she goes on barefoot, much against Tooth's wishes. As we start walking uphill, making our walking sticks very handy, Jack decides to continue our previous conversation by asking, "Did you really think my mother would go as far as to get you assassinated?"

"Man, I dunno," I admit with a shrug. "She seems willing to do \_anything\_ to keep you safe. What makes you think she wouldn't go that far?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe the fact that she's okay with us being friends now?"

I'm not even aware that I've stopped walking until Jack's a good couple yards ahead of me. He stops as well when he notices that I'm

not longer beside him, and turns to send me a look that asks me what's wrong.

I narrow my eyes at him. "How can I trust that what you're sayin' is true? After what you pulled on me earlier?"

He seems confused at first, but when he catches on, a wide grin appears on his face as he chuckles and shakes his head. "Those are some serious trust issues you've got there, Hic."

"Yeah, and I \_wonder why.\_"

"I just took my own advice," he tells me, going back to the main subject at hand, all joking aside. "I told you that you needed to talk to your father about the whole future thing, so I decided to talk to my mother about the whole you-being-my-friend thing."

"And it worked?"

He nods. "And it worked."

"Wow."

"I know, right? I was a little shocked too when she said she'd like to meet you."

With hearing those words, I feel like I've suddenly been hit with a pound of bricks, and if this makes any sense, it's in the best kind of way. For the last month, all I've been trying to do is find a way to get Jack's mom to not see me as a bad guy, and now here we are. Since Jack's here, and if what he's telling me is true, then that means that she knows we're out together \_right\_ \_now\_, and I don't know how he feels about that, but me - well, that's kind of really, really \_awesome\_.

"What about you?" Jack asks me, breaking my train of thought. "I went and actually talked to my mother. Did \_you\_ talk to \_your\_ father?"

I shrug. "Kinda."

"Explain."

"Itâ€¦ ugh. It wasn't about the whole future thing, if that's what you're thinking. And not much \_talking\_ actually happened either."

"I don't see where you're going with this."

"It wasâ€¦ after I had left - y'know, from helping him clean out the garage - heâ€¦ he found something that he thought I'd want to have. And, wellâ€¦ he gave it to me. And though we didn't really talk about it afterwards, it kinda meant a lot to me."

"What was it, if you don't mind me asking."

"It was this little dragon plush I had back when I was a kid. All beaten up and worn out, stitches everywhere. I had completely forgotten I had the thing."



"Okay, but what does that-"

"My mom made it for me."

He doesn't say anything, and though I don't look over to see his face, I can tell he doesn't plan on saying anything, so I go on. "She had made it for me when I was, like, a baby or something. It used to be my favorite toy and, after she left, I justâ€¦ didn't want it anymore. Reminded me too much of her, I guess. But I haven't seen it since andâ€¦ I dunno. My dad just said, 'I found this today and I thought you might want it' and I said thanks and yeah. That was about it."

"So, you guys didn't really \_talk\_?" Jack asks, sounding a little disappointed; I can see why he would be though. He had made so much progress with his mom last night, while, in his eyes, I had barely made any.

"No," I tell him simply, "but sometime, there isn't really anything that needs to be said."

He doesn't say anything to that, but by the way he looks down at the ground and nods his head, like he's letting my words sink in, I can see he sort of understands what I mean.

Eventually we find a little clearing where we can all take a breather. It's at another little stream cutting its way through the woods, only this time it's wider than the one from before and not quite as deep, so we can all wade through it if we take off our shoes and roll up our pants. There's several large boulders sprouting up from the cool water, so Tooth takes her perch on one with little Sophie in her lap, making sure her backpack won't fall in without her noticing before sitting down.

Though Tooth had advised that none of us get too wet, it's pretty much inevitable that a water-splashing war breaks out. Cami starts it by trying to splash Jamie when his back is turned, but her aim is off and she instead sends a face full of water Astrid's way. Astrid, being the competitive girl she is, takes it as a threat, jumps down from her boulder, and starts sending huge waves of water Cami's way. That gets Jamie going, which causes Jack to forget that he's the eldest of all of us, so he starts splashing everyone as well. Tooth tries to get them to all calm down and stop, but once Baby Tooth starts throwing the water from her water bottle around, the poor girl gives up.

"Don't worry about it too much," I tell her, taking a seat beside her and Sophie, who's bouncing up and down in Tooth's lap at all the excitement. "Put a bunch of kids in a stream and they're bound to get wet. Especially if someone like Jack's around."

Tooth laughs at this, seeming to relax some. "\_Especially\_ if Jack's around."

The three of us sit there, watching the others chase and splash each other. Sophie crawls out from Tooth's lap and perches on the edge of the rock, but doesn't make any advances towards the action, which I can tell relieves Tooth.

"Why don't you go join them?" she asks me, cocking her head in their

direction, making her stubby ponytail bob a little. "I think the little ones would absolutely \_love\_ it if this were to become older kids verses younger kids."

"As, uhâ€¦| \_appealing\_ as that sounds," I reply, cringing a little at the sight of Cami jumping onto Astrid's back unexpectedly, causing her knees to buckle and both of the girls to crash into the water, "I'm gonna have to pass. Water was never really my thing."

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"I don't like the rusting."

"The rustâ€¦|?" It takes her a moment, but I can tell she eventually gets what I'm referring to by the way her pink eyes flicker down to my prosthetic leg. "\_Ooooh\_. Oh. I'mâ€¦| I'm sorry. I didn't mean to-"

"Nah, don't worry about it," I assure her with a smile. "When you lose a leg, you lose a couple other things along with it, y'know Besides. I'm not much for water fights anyways. Lost too many of them as a kid to really be able to enjoy them now."

"I can relate to that," Tooth tells me. "I'm not much into water either, so I guess that means we have each other to keep each other company."

"And me, and me!" Sophie chirps, turning briefly towards us, and then going back to watching the others.

Tooth and I both laugh at this, then join Sophie in watching everyone else battle each other with water. Jack and Jamie seem to have their own little competition going on now, both of them trying to see who can hold their breath the longest, Jamie winning each time and Jack demanding a rematch whenever he comes up for air too early. The girls, however, are still in the middle of a fierce water battle, Baby Tooth and Cami having joined forces against Astrid. Both girls are armed with water bottles, refilling and attacking at the same time, as Astrid's only defense is her cupped hands and her speed. They have a hard time keeping up with her as she dances from rock to rock, a glowing smile on her face. Despite the fact that her hair is damp and about to fall out of its braid, she still looks as great as ever; it all reminds me of the night we all star tripped together by Caliban Cave and I watched her spin in circles under the night sky, laughing to herself for everyone to hear. She's living in the moment, allowing her walls to go down for once and just have fun, something I love to see her do.

"She was talking about you earlier," I hear Tooth speak up from beside me. I give her a confused look, despite the fact that I know who she's talking about, since I \_was\_ \_just\_ staring at her for a good minute now. Tooth merely laughs, since she can probably see right through me. "Astrid," she goes on. "We were talking about you earlier, while we were hiking here."

I raise an eyebrow, though I'm beginning to be able to hhear my heartbeat in my ears. "Oh yeah? Only bad things, I'm sure."

Tooth laughs again. "Noooo. She was actually really sweet, to tell the truth. Said she was happy she's been able to spend all this time

with you lately."

I can feel the beating in my chest quicken and I try my hardest to make it to where Tooth can't tell, but it's difficult.

"R-really?"

"Mhm," - oh man, she can totally tell I'm silently freaking out here - "She also said she's really nervous about some race you've got coming up too. She doesn't want to see you get hurt again."

At hearing this, I can't help but look down at my missing leg, the day I had lost it coming into my memory for the first time since Jack asked me about it. I can recall everything before it, even some stuff during it, but after? It's all a blur, like it had been a dream and didn't even happen. I remember hearing someone yell my name from somewhere in the distance as I lost consciousness though - a girl's voice - but I had assumed I had been hearing things. Maybe I hadn't.

"Hiccup? Are you okay?"

I turn back towards Tooth, having totally forgotten she was there beside me. "Yeah," I assure her maybe a little too quickly. "I'm justâ€¦ just thinking."

"Are you nervous about this race too?" she asks.

"Aâ€¦ a little."

"Jack is too."

"Huh?"

"Jack." Tooth looks down at her feet for a moment, like she's trying to remember exactly what he had said to her. "He told me about it the other day, how you're racing someone that might be hard for you to beat. He said you said you're not really scared about it, but he told me that he is."

"Heâ€¦ he said that?"

"You mean a lot to him, you know. He looks up to you, values your opinion on things. Cares about you. I hope you know that."

I can't get myself to respond, since there's too big of a knot caught in my throat to, so I just nod.

I hear Tooth sigh beside me. "Justâ€¦ don't get hurt, okay? Not only for your sake, but also for his. It'd crush him."

"I-I know," I stammer out, turning back towards her. "I won't. I pro-

Before I can finish though, a piercing scream rips through the air around us.

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Jamie starts sprinting in the opposite direction from me, his arms pumping at his sides as his bare feet grip the slippery rocks underneath him. I can tell his eyes aren't concentrating on the ground, not watching what he's doing or if where he's stepping is safe. His laugh fills the air, completely caught up in the moment as he focuses on getting as far away from me as possible.

It all makes me nervous.

"Jamie!" I shout after him. "Slow down! You might slip!"

"Don't worry, Jack!" he yells back, not even twisting around to face me. "I'm really good with running on slippery surfaces! You should see me when I'm in the snow! I'm like a pro!"

"T-that's great, but still. Slow down, please!" I try taking a couple cautious steps towards him, keeping him in my sight. Astrid's too busy fighting off Baby Tooth and Cami, and Tooth and Hiccup seem too focused on whatever subject they're talking about to take any notice on what's going on with us anymore. That leaves only me to care for Jamie now.

He spins towards me to make sure I'm not gaining on him, walking backwards a little too quick for my taste. I'm about to yell at him again to watch his step when, in only a second, his left foot misses his intended target and he's falling towards the water. Everything seems to happen in slow motion after that. It seems. My whole stomach is caught in my throat as his arms flail around, trying to catch onto something, anything, to support him. I'm about to yell, to get the other's attention, maybe even to somehow stop him from falling, but by the time the words get to my lips, he's already hit the ground.

And is fine.

There's a pause as we both take in what had just happened. Our eyes meet, and I can see in his that he understands that what just happened could've ended in a very different way.

A skittish smile forms on his lips. "That hurt."

I let out a laugh, relieved to see that he's alright. "I bet it did."

Jamie gets up from the rocks, rubbing his bottom, which I can tell by his expression must hurt from the impact of the fall. As he glimpses up towards me, sending a look that's supposed to reassure me that he's alright, a strange feeling overcomes me; a feeling I haven't felt in the longest time.

The last thing I see is Jamie's wide eyes, filled with horror, and then darkness.

I'm falling through nothing and it feels like knives are penetrating the back of my skull. I scream as the pain hits me all at once. I want to call out for help, but all I can do is scream, scream at the pain engulfing me. The more I scream, the more the pain hurts. I scream until it doesn't even feel like I'm screaming anymore.

And then it all stops.

I'm standing in the middle of a forest, no sound except for the shifting of the leaves above and my steady breathing. I feel like me, but at the same time, I don't. It all looks familiar, these trees and rocks and roots, but I can't pinpoint where I've seen them before.

"Chris!"

My head automatically turns to see Emma, wearing a loose brown dress I've never seen before, standing in between two thin branches sprouting up from the ground. Her smile widens as our eyes meet, and before I can get a word out - ask her where we are, what we're doing here, what's going on - she's running in the opposite direction, her thin legs carrying her surprisingly fast for someone so small.

"Where are you going?" I hear myself say, though I hadn't even thought of saying it. I try to get my feet to stop following her, knowing that this is a trap, just like all the other nightmares I've fallen victim to, but I can't. It's like I'm preprogrammed, only doing what I had been instructed to do.

"We're almost there!" Emma yells back at me, her brown hair flying around her face as she turns to gesture me forward. "Just follow me!"

"Where are we going?" I hear myself ask again, though I think I already know.

We run through the woods, my legs moving me forwards when all I really want is to go back. I can only see glimpses of Emma's hair trailing behind her, jerking from left to right, and every time it disappears, even for a second, a sudden pain hits the back of head that forces me to move faster.

I finally catch up to her when I arrive at a stream, a stream I remember from one of the first nightmares I had. Everything about it looks the same - the towering trees, the trickling water, the rocks and the cloudless horizon. I search for the dark figure, ready for it to make its entrance any moment now and for the pain to consume me again, but it's nowhere to be seen. The only person with me is Emma, little Emma, standing in the center of it all, picking up rocks and studying them like they're the most fascinating thing in the world. When she looks up and notices me standing there, a smile spreads across her face, I feel a pain in my heart, and I realize just how much I've missed her.

"I found some really cool rocks!" she tells me, holding them proudly above her head. "Come over here! You're not gonna get any cool rocks from standing over there, silly!"

My feet move me forward and onto the first rock, the tip of my right shoe getting wet as step. Emma smiles as she sees me coming towards her, crouching down to continue her rock searching. As I reach her, I take another look around, ready for the dark figure to lurk out from between the narrow trees, to this this seemingly perfect dream into another horrible nightmare.

"What are you looking for?" I hear Emma ask.

I turn my gaze down to her, and she's looking curiously up at me, her mouth slightly left agape in wonder. "Nothing," I hear myself say, which makes me feel so aggravated, since "nothing" is not what I was looking for. As my body bends down and starts shuffling through the rocks littering the river bed, I try with all my might to tell Emma that I don't feel safe here, that something bad is going on, but my lips won't seem to open, no matter how hard I force them to.

"I'm gonna go look over there, 'kay?" Emma tells me suddenly, hearing her straighten up next to me and start off down the stream. I feel myself nod my head, though she doesn't see, since she's already started skipping away, her soaked sneakers scrapping the wet surfaces of the rocks.

"Be careful," I hear myself warn her.

"Don't worry. I wi-

I somehow manage to look up fast enough to see her shoe losing contact with the rock she's standing on. Her hand releasing all of the stones she had earlier collected, causing them to fly through the air in all directions as she lets out a piercing scream that sends chills down my spine.

For the first time in this dream, my body does what I want it to do. The rocks in my hands are dropped with hesitation as I dart forward, nearly losing my balance as I extend my arms out to catch her. I feel the cloth of her dress against my fingertips as her body collapses neatly into mine, knocking all the wind out of my lungs and sending me plummeting backwards onto the rocky stream below.

All I hear is a sharp crack, like someone's hit the back of my head with a baseball bat, and then I'm underwater. The water around me turns from a clear blue to a stained red and I forget how to breathe.

I'm not under for long though. Small hands break through the water's surface and pull me out and back into the air, shaking as they move from my hair up to my cheeks. Emma's brown eyes stare down at me, tears lining their rims as she stumbles out words like "Chris" and "sorry" and "help".

I say her name, my vision suddenly becoming blurred, almost to the point where I can't make her out anymore. Her hands move up to her mouth when she sees me attempting to talk, and she lets out a harsh sob, and I want to reach out for her, to tell her to stop crying, that I'm right here, that it's all going to be okay, but I can't feel my arm. She jumps up all of the sudden, disappearing from me view completely, and I feel panic growing with the pain in my head. I try to say her name again, but my throat is too dry, and when I try to speak, it feels like I'm bleeding from the inside.

"Jack?"

The last thing I see is the cloudless sky before I give in and close my eyes.

"Jaaack!"

There's not fighting the pain growing in the back of my head now.

"Wake up! Jack! You need to \_wake up!\_"

I'm too tired to fight it now. Too tired for fighting.

"Please, Jack!"

I just want to sleep.

"You can't die on me, you idiot! Not now!"

But Hiccup.

All of the sudden, air enters my lungs at an alarming speed and I gasp for it, filling me up and making me feel alive again. My eyes fly open to see six faces, all overcast and staring down at me, both in terror and in relief, a bright clouded backdrop behind them.

"Jack!" I hear one of the faces say as unexpected arms tighten around my limp body, engulfing me in their embrace. "Oh thank \_God!\_ Thank God you're awake! Are you alright? Are you hurt?"

"Give the guy some space," I hear another girl's face tell everyone. "He just had, like, a seizure or somethin'. Don't crowd around him. You heard me! Move it!" Some of the smaller faces disappear then, the sound of the voice continuing to ward them off.

One of the faces that remain is Tooth's, I can see it now. Her pink eyes suddenly come into focus, and they're full of tears, though she's also smiling down at me. I can feel her body shaking slightly, my head resting in her lap as she runs her hand soothingly through my wet hair.

And the other face is Hiccup. He's staring down at me with wide, green eyes, apparent shock, yet also pure awe, filing them.

"What in the name of Odin just happened, Jack?" he asks me, sounding upset for some reason.

"Shh, don't talk," Tooth stops me before I can say a word. Her head snaps up towards Hiccup, looking furious at him. "He just had a \_seizure\_. He shouldn't be-"

"I remember," I whisper, stopping both of them from talking instantly.

"What?" Hiccup whispers back, moving in closer, his auburn hair falling around his face.

"I remember," I say again. "I rememberâ€¦ everything."

## 16. Who Said This Was a Game?

\_\*\*Phew.\*\*\_\*\* Finally got this sucker done.\*\*

I had planned on finishing this chapter yesterday, but then HTTYD2 became a thing and all my feels made it impossible for me to sit down and write. I got it done though, so whatever! And HTTYD2 was absolutely \_magnificent\_, \_if you're wondering. I'm actually about to leave to go see it again with the boyfriend.

Slight warning because of panic attacks near the end in Jack's narration. It isn't anything horrible, but yeah. Just a friendly warning.

And that's all I got for you guys today! I'm not gonna be able to update next week, let alone write, since I'll be at a college orientation for half the week, then a summer camp for the other half. Updates still may be a little far apart after that too, considering I'm going to England with a friend for a month and finding time to write may be hard, but I'll try my best to work on this whenever I get the change.

Thanks for the reviews and follows and whatever! You guys are \_splendid\_ beings!

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"So, we were at Ms Gothi's place this morning, right? And you know how she has, like, twenty cats that she just has wandering around her property?"

"Yeah, she hired me to look after them once when she was on vacation," Astrid says, messing carelessly with the pen of her ordering notepad. "I don't remember most of them, but I do remember that the orange one was named Killer."

Fish lets out an amused laugh. "What an appropriate name."

"Oh no. What happened?"

"Well, Hiccup was mowing and I was cutting the shrubs - y'know, the usual thing - when I guess Killer somehow managed to escape from the house."

"Oh gods," Astrid murmurs under her breath.

"Next thing I know, the stupid cat's charging me and I'm running around the yard screaming bloody murder with Hiccup right behind, trying to catch the cat. He was a fast one though, and he somehow managed to get a hold of my leg, and, Astrid, look at what that little monster did to me." Fish puts his half-finished hamburger down on its laid out wrappings and bends over to show Astrid his battle scars from earlier that morning. There's four of them, each evenly spread apart as they curve down his calve, finishing right above his sweat-stained socks.

Right as she sees the red scratches, Astrid lets out a sharp hiss. "Man. And this is exactly why I don't want to have a cat as a pet. They're beasts, only acting on instinct." She turns her head in my



direction, opposite of Fish, brushing her bangs out of her eyes. "Except Toothless. He's a good cat, so no offence to either of you."

I just shrug, having barely been paying attention to their conversation in the first place to take any offense.

Astrid, to her own credit, notices this right away. "Normally you're full of sarcastic remarks, yet today you've been oddly quiet. I mean, I'm not complaining," - she lets out a half smirk, and I notice Fish beside her trying to hold back a laugh - "but it's very unlike you. Is something up?"

I shrug again, which I know is a bad idea; she's acting so natural with me today, and I know that not verbally replying is going to get me a one-way ticket to her bad side.

And I'm right. Her joking tone has completely washed away as she says, "A shrug isn't an answer, Haddock," her eyebrows now furrowed behind her bangs.

Before she can really start getting on my case though, Fish comes in and saves the day, sensing the sudden hostility in the air. "He's just tired, Astrid. Ms Gothi had really let her place go this past month, so he had to mow over her yard twice to get the grass to look decent. He just needs some rest."

Astrid, who hasn't taken her baby blue eyes off me, doesn't seem convinced, but she doesn't question me further. Instead, she says she needs to get back to work, and then leaves us, blading away off towards the ordering station.

"Thanks," I say to Fish once she's out of hearing distance. "Not really in the mood for an interrogation today."

"Yeah, I can tell," he goes, wrapping his fingers around his plastic cup of water and taking a sip out of it. "Are you still upset about Jack?"

"Not upset. Justâ€¦ worried, I guess."

"I'm sure he's fine, Hic."

"Yeah, but do you know that?"

He opens his mouth, as if he actually knows the state of Jack, then stops himself and shrugs his wide shoulders. I let out a sigh.

It's been three days and no one's heard a thing from Jack. Shortly after his most recent episode at the stream, Astrid had run off to get his parents for help, Tooth and I staying with him to make sure he didn't relapse. Cami had been acting like such an adult, keeping the littler kids quiet and calm, something I thanked her for later in the form of a milkshake.

When Astrid arrived with Mister and Mrs Overland at her side, it was like taking Jack home after his race with Lout; I could see the very blood being drained from their faces as they saw their only son lying there, pale and weak, and me at his side.

I was ready for them to scold me - to tell me that there was no way in hell that they'd ever even consider allowing Jack to be friends with me now - but it never came. It was all happened so quickly, so precisely, like it had all been rehearsed; Mister Overland scooping up his son's limp body and carrying it away through the trees, Mrs Overland trying to hold back her tears while not making it too obvious that she was avoiding my eye contact. They didn't speak a word to us, didn't ask us what had happened; they probably already knew, now that I think about it.

I wish that I knew. I wish I had been watching him the moment before he collapsed, to see what had caused it. What had been going through his head as his body violently convulsed among the rocks, somehow allowing him to "remember everything". What did he remember? How did he even remember it? It seemed that, as I watched Mister Overland carry Jack away, I was also watching a lot of answers being carried away as well.

"You should go get some rest," Fish tells me gently, breaking my train of thought. "You actually do look really exhausted."

"Yeah, and I feel it," I admit, reaching up and hiding my face in my hands. My sweat doused hair touches my fingertips and I'm suddenly aware of how gross I feel. "A nice shower and nap sounds pretty great right about now."

"I'll get the tab. You go home."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, of course. You barely ate anything anyways. It's all good."

"Thanks, Fish. You're most definitely the best."

"Oh, stop it, you," he teases, batting his hand my way as I get up from my chair. I laugh, shaking my head despite the fact that I'm happy he was able to get me to smile. Before I can fully get away though, he speaks up again.

"Don't worry about him, Hic," he tells me simply. "I'm sure he's fine. Worry about yourself, alright? You need to, with that race of yours just 'round the corner."

Oh yeah. The race. The race that's only three days away.

I give him a thumbs up, trying to put on a face that'll convince him not to worry about me - I'll be fine. Even if I'm not that successful at it, he lets me slide by returning my thumbs up and smile, which I silently thank him for.

I had thought I had been ready to race Lout, but after these last couple of days, I can't be too sure anymore. Not knowing Jack's mental and physical state is making me feel incredibly uneasy, but the idea of not having him at my race all together? That was never even an option; I can't even imagine a race without him on the sidelines.

I suppose these turn of events does even us out though, considering I hadn't been able to make it to his race. I just hope the outcome to

mine is different from his.

As I walk home, I try to clear my mind of everything that's been bugging me lately. No thoughts of the million times I've pissing off Astrid, no stupid race with Lout, no Jack, no nothing. I concentrate on my surroundings instead, noticing the complete lack of clouds in the sky and the dryness of the grass. I try to remember the last time it had rained and I'm completely unable to recollect.

By the time I arrived home, feeling five times more exhausted than before, but more at peace, a shower seems like the only thing I can afford to do without completely passing out. My dad, on the other hand, has other plans.

"Hiccup," he goes, startling me as I lock the front door behind me. I hadn't even noticed him sitting in his usual arm chair, an emotionless expression on his hard face that makes me feel anxious. I'd much rather he looked upset than like this, because at least then I could somewhat tell what's on his mind and in store for me.

"Oh, uh— hey, Dad," I greet him back nervously. I find myself hoping to see Toothless come bounding down the stairs to greet me, but he never does, much to my disappointment. "I had a long day at work today, so I was just gonna—"

"Come sit with me," he interrupts, his expression not shifting an inch. "We need to talk."

I hesitate, staring at the seat on the couch next to him. "Am I in trouble?"

"No, you're not in trouble. We just need to talk."

"And what type of talk are we talking about here?" I ask, slowly inching towards where he's seated, yet still keeping my distance, just in case of a needed escape.

It's at this comment that makes a sign of emotion appear on his face, and I quickly wish I could take it back. He tells me again to come sit again, the now rigid look in his eyes telling me I don't have a choice.

After taking my seat on the adjacent couch, my dad leans forward, resting his elbows on his thick knees. By the way he's looking at the hardwood floor between his feet, I can tell he's thinking over his words very carefully, like he's practiced them a thousand times before. Knowing him though, who's to say he hasn't.

"If I do recall correctly, summer's almost over," he finally says to me, that infamous business-like tone that I hate so much coating his words. "Is this right?"

"Uh, yeah," I say, trying my best to keep my brewing annoyance contained. "Like, a little less than a month to go." Hearing myself say this brings the weight upon me; summer ending means school starting, which means seven and a half hours of classes, homework, and a ton of hormonal teenagers that hate me for one reason or another every day. All of sudden, I wish it was the beginning of June again, not the beginning of August.

"Well, because of that," my dad goes on, not appearing to notice my discomfort with the date, "the plan to have you intern at my office isn't going to work."

I have to fight to let out a sigh of relief.

"Because of this however, I've decided that, during this upcoming school year, you'll be interning with me every day after school."

I'm suddenly not as tired as before. "What? Dad, no."

"Okay, okay. How about every other day?"

"No, Dad, that's now what- I don't want to intern for you, I..."

Though I suppose I should've seen it coming, my dad's face turns as solid as a rock as I trail off, additional redness growing in his cheeks and forehead. I know I've hit the sensitive spot and that there's officially no going back now, but this is something I've got to do. Whether or not I meant to waltz myself into this conversation, I've got to show him, rather than just tell.

"Hiccup, if you're not going to intern for me, then what in Odin's name are you going to do?" he asks, a hint of hopelessness that surprises me in his voice. "You spend all your time on those useless bikes and— and doing only the gods know what with your friends. Are you even thinking about your future?"

"I— I dunno," I admit. "But—"

"I'm trying to help you out here, son, but it won't work if you don't let me."

"I know, I know. I just—"

"It's a harsh world out there, Hiccup. Having the family business already under your belt after you graduate could prove to be very helpful to you; a privilege even."

"Dad, I—"

"I just don't understand why you won't just—"

"Dad! Just— for once in your life, will you please just listen to me? Just hear me out? Even for just a second."

My dad stares back at me with wide eyes, caught off guard at my blatant outburst to get him to stop talking. I'm also a little taken aback by it too - where did that courage even come from anyways? - but I can't afford to let this opportunity slip by, not when I finally have his full, undivided attention.

"No, I admit, I don't really know what I want to do with my life," I tell him, trying to keep my voice even, "but I'm fifteen, Dad. Most kids my age don't know what they want to do. I still have three years of high school, then whatever amount of years of college to figure it out. And who knows. Maybe taking over the family business is what I'll end up doing, but as of right now— well, it's not what I want

to do, y'know? I justâ€¦ I wanna do things I wanna do, and I know that's selfish, but Iâ€¦ I justâ€¦"

I trail off, not entirely sure where I'm going with this anymore. I've gotten what I wanted to say out, and my dad's studying me with those watery gray eyes of his, like he's trying to see if I'm being sincere or not.

"And they're not useless," I go on, suddenly remembering his comment about the bikes and feeling defensive. "I happen to really like biking, and, to be honest, itâ€¦ it hurts to hear your put it down like that. I mean, I've put a lot of time into building that bike and-

"Wait, wait, wait. You built that bike?" he suddenly speaks up. "Allâ€¦ all on your own?"

"Well, yeah. It's been kinda a pain, but yeah."

"Can I see it?"

Now it's my turn to get caught off guard. My dad stands up abruptly from his seat after I absentmindedly nod back in response, all of which makes me realize that he's being completely serious in his request. I follow him as he heads to the garage and through the doorframe, still in somewhat of a trance at the situation. After I carefully take my bike down from its rack, my dad kneels down on to one knee and actually seems to be inspecting it, like he knows something about bikes and how they work.

"You built this?" he asks again, brushing his fingers across the top tube of the frame, where I've recently added in a royal red spray paint the words Night Fury.

"Uh, yeah. Well, kinda. I changed a lot of the old parts to newer, better ones, so it'll go faster and take tighter turns. Lout's bike is a lot heavier than mine too, so I've worked on making it-

"Wait, Lout's bike? Your cousin?"

"Yeah. Uhâ€¦ we're racing this weekend. I mean, he challenged me and stuff. But we're racing."

"So that's what you kids all do with these bikes," he says in a near whisper, sounding like this piece of information is making everything come together. "You race them."

"Well, sometimes. Most people just have bikes to have bikes, but some people like to race them. You know. Like me."

"Oh yeah?" He stands up straight again, placing his meaty hands on his hips. I allow my tensed shoulders to relax a bit when I notice the small smile that's formed between his beard and mustache. "You any good at it then? The racing?"

I shrug. "It's all I am good at."

He stares at me again - the same look as before on - like he's trying to comprehend what I'm telling him; I'll give him some credit for at least trying now. I feel kind of stupid for saying what I said,

making it sound like I'm not good at anything other than racing, though that may actually be true. Sure I'm pretty decent at drawing and making things, but biking is the only real thing I'm one hundred percent confident at doing.

Eventually, my dad lets out a heavy sigh, taking a seat on a pile of boxes in the corner of the garage, the lot of them groaning under his immense weight. "Iâ€¦ I'm sorry, Hiccup. You know. For putting down biking and everything. I may not understand it, butâ€¦ but I shouldn't dismiss it simply because I don't understand it."

I'm in shock, but I try to not let it show. "It's, uhâ€¦ it's okay. And, wellâ€¦ I guess I'm sorry for being so stubborn about the whole intern thing. I know the family business really means a lot to you and I'm just kinda being a jerk about it. So yeah. Sorry."

He nods his head, and though I can tell he's trying to act like my apology is no big deal by simply saying, "It's alright, son," I can tell it means a lot more than just that. He turns back towards my bike and asks, "You really likeâ€¦ this?" gesturing towards it, still positioned between us.

I don't hesitate to confirm with a series of hard nods.

He looks back over at me, his hand running through the tip of his beard as he studies me for the millionth time in the last ten minutes. It makes me a little uncomfortable, I'll admit, but if him looking at me like this will make him see how much I love biking, than I'm all for it. I'll stand here for hours if it'll help make him understand.

All of the sudden, he claps his heavy hands together with a sound that puts thunder to shame, saying as he stands up, "Alright then. A compromise. We'll make a compromise."

I'm instantly confused. "Huh?"

"I'll stop bugging you about your biking and future and everything," he says, walking up to me, "if you promise that, next summer, you'll intern for me. I know you think you won't like it, but maybe you will. You never know until you at least try."

I look up at him, staring him full in the face, and I can see plainly on his features that he's not messing around. If I confirm this agreement between us, then he'll never talk down to me when it comes to biking again, never bring up what I'm going to do after I'm done with school. In other words, he'll finally leave me alone about all the topics that make me want to avoid him. I'll finally have my dad back - the one that used to tell me stories of Vikings and dragons before going to bed every night as a kid; the one that did all he could do to raise me properly despite having no mother around; the one that taught me how to ride a bike in the first place.

Though spending my next summer in an office with my dad and all his boring colleagues wasn't on the top of my to-do list, I guess this is a pretty fair bargain.

"Alright," I say, letting out a small sigh at having to give away my next summer's freedom, but also a smile at gaining my own new freedom. "You've got yourself a deal."

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I'm trapped inside my head and I don't know how long I'm stuck there, but I'm in battle the entire time. Instead of darkness being my surroundings, I'm in the woods again; that same haunting woods from my earlier nightmares, the narrow trees barring me in. The shadowy figure follows me as I walk, then run, then sprint, further and further into the copse, the aura slowly becoming more and more drear and eerie. Branches are bare and mangled, their fallen leaves coating the cold bottom of the forest's floor. I want to turn back, but I know I can't, for the figure follows my every step, tracking me.

\_She was better off without you.\_

\_They'll never see you as one of them.\_

\_It's all your fault.\_

\_You shouldn't even try.\_

I try to block it all out, try to find some way - any way - to get out of this horror. No matter how much I focus on the world outside my head though, I'm still trapped, the words, like venom, trickling into my ears.

"Leave me alone!" I scream out of frustration, whirling around, only to be met with a gust of wind. I squeeze my eyes shut, allowing the breeze to die down before reopening them. When I do, the shadowy figure has found its way in front of me, causing me to gasp and nearly fall backwards - only this time, its hood is down, revealing for the first time a face.

It's a man, his features long and slender, the skin wrapped around him a dull, dead gray. His bright yellow eyes stare into me, giving me the feeling of claws tearing into my chest. He sees my discomfort and smirks.

"What do you want from me?" I beg.

\_I know what you did.\_

"W-what?"

\_There's no way you can live it down, boy.\_

"Liveâ€| what are you talking about?"

\_I will never let you forget.\_

"I'm done with you, whoever - whatever you are," I say through gritted teeth. "Justâ€| just leave me alone. I don't want to play this game anymore."

I turn quickly on my heel, ready to attempt yet another fruitless

escape, but before I can take one step, I'm stopping by the sight of a body. It's of a small child, lying in a pile of discarded leaves, its limbs sprawled out in all directions as its lifeless eyes stare up into the darkened sky.

Though I know it's a mistake, I take a step forward and-

Emma.

\_Who said anything about this being a game?\_

There's a bright light, making it not only hard for me to see, but to breathe. Then I'm looking up at my white popcorn ceiling.

What in the world is happening to me?

I slowly move myself up to discover that I've been placed at some point on my bed, my covers draped over my sweating body. Looking around, I notice the light streaming through the opened window, signaling the time to only be about midday. I know that that was around the time I had been at the stream with Hiccup and Tooth and everyone else, but I wonder how many days later is it.

Wait.

The stream.

The vision.

My memory.

I feel my body begin to tremble as I retain everything I had seen that day; the towering trees and the flowing stream, little Emma collecting rocks, then falling, only to be cushioned by me. The blood stained water and her tears. It all comes back to me as I stare down at my quivering hands, barely being able to grasp what has happened.

"I remember," I say, mainly only to hear myself say it. "Iâ€| remember what happened. Iâ€| I saved her. I saved her."

I saved her.

My body can't seem to sit still now that these thoughts have materialized in my mind, so I pull myself hurriedly up and out of bed. There's a weak pain in my side and forehead, but I ignore it, too thrilled to notice or even care. I have to tell someone. I have to tell someone what I know before I forget it all again.

I make my way down the hallway and to the stairs, carefully descending down them as not to trip, but still fast enough to where I don't go crazy with impatience. A smile's on my face the entire time.

"Mom! Dad!" I yell through the house once I've reached the bottom floor. There's a rustle and the sound of movement coming from the living room, so I head that way, my smile growing with every step I take.

I nearly collide with my father as I enter the room. His expression



is of worry, his eyes wide as he stares at me, both of us eye to eye. My mother, standing not so far behind him, bears the same demeanor.

"Jack! Whatâ€¦ are youâ€¦ are you okay?" my father asks me with diligence in his voice, reaching out and firmly grabbing my shoulders. His eyes seem to be searching for something, but I can't think of what.

"I'm fine," I assure both of them with a smile, lifting my father's hands off my shoulders. "I'm fine, really. I justâ€¦ I remember."

Both of my parents send me baffled looks.

"I remember, you guys. Iâ€¦ I remember what happened the day I lost my memory. It justâ€¦ it all came back to me."

Though they both look somewhat confused by what I'm telling them, that doesn't stop them from showing their euphoria. My father wraps me into a tight hug - something I don't believe he's ever done before - and my mother is smiling the most immense grin I've ever seen her wear, what look like tears coming to her eyes as well. They're congratulating me, telling me how happy they are that it's finally all come back to me, and I don't know what to do with myself other than to just smile back, my cheeks beginning to hurt, but not caring one bit.

"So, what happened then?" my father asks me once everything's calmed down. The three of us are now seated on the couch, both of them on either side of me.

"We were at a stream," I tell them, feeling such pride in being able to actually picture what I'm saying in my mind. "I don't know where it was, but we were collecting rocks."

"We?" my mother asks, looking falteringly at my father.

"Emma and me," I tell them. "We were out collecting rocks andâ€¦ she fell. I was able to get to her before she hit the rocks though, so she was fine. But I hit my head, andâ€¦ that explains my memory loss. I mean, hitting your head on something really hard can do that, right?"

Neither of them answers me; just continue to stare.

I decide to go on anyways, despite their looks. "I don't remember much after that, but I do remember her running off somewhere. Probably to look for help or something. And apparently she got it, because I woke up in the hospital!"

"Oh, Jackâ€¦" my father suddenly says, giving me a sad look. I look over towards my mother and her shaking hands have moved up to her mouth, no longer bearing a smile, tears forming on the rims of her eyes, this time not with happiness.

"Wha- why are you crying?" I ask her. Instead of answering, she leans forwards in her seat and plants her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking as she begins to cry. I quickly turn towards my father, my heart beat quickening inside my chest as I ask, "What did I say?"

What's wrong?"

"Youâ€¦ you really don't remember," he says, staring at my blankly.

"Of course he doesn't remember, Will," I hear my mother speak up, her face still hidden in her hands and her words unexpectedly harsh. "He had passed out. Hit his head on a rock. There's no way he could've knownâ€¦"

"Known what?" I ask.

Neither of them answer. Neither of them seem to be able to look at me, when only a moment ago, I was all they could look at. A wave of exasperation rising inside of me at this; we were doing so well, all so happy; I have to know what took that all away.

"Known what?" I ask again, only this time I try to sound firm, to show I'm not fooling around.

"Emmaâ€¦ sheâ€¦ she didn't find help," my father tells me slowly, still refusing to lock eyes with me. "Some hikers found you and they called for help. Not Emma."

"Oh," I let out under my breath. "Wellâ€¦ okay. That's alright too. I meanâ€¦ I got help, right? That's all that matters, right?" I send an encouraging smile their ways, but it doesn't end up working in the way I had intended it to - my mother starts to cry harder, which causes my father to let out a heavy sigh.

"It'sâ€¦ it's a little more complicated than that, I'm afraid."

"How?"

My father turns to look over at my mother - maybe to seek some encouragement - but she's now gotten up and left the room entirely, though I can still hear her softly weeping in the kitchen. An impulse comes over me to go in to comfort her, but when my father finally looks back at me, a look in his eyes that tells me he's about to start explaining, it stops me from moving.

"How is it more complicated?" I ask again.

"Jackâ€¦ I'mâ€¦ I'm sorry, butâ€¦ I don't know any other way to put this."

"To putâ€¦ what?"

"Emmaâ€¦" He sighs, closing his eyes as he finishes. "Emma's dead."

Everything stops. The birds outside chirping, my mother's weeping, the fan overhead's propellers, they all just stop. I can't feel anything. My hands, which had been shaking from suspense beside me, could be detached from my body and I wouldn't be able to tell. My throat is dry and my eyes can't focus and my mind is running a thousand miles per hour as I play his words over and over again in my head, trying to make sense of them.

"She'sâ€¦ she's what?"

"I'm so sorry," I hear him say again, his voice cracking as he finally gives into the tears, one now streaming down his face. "Weâ€¦ we thought maybe you knew. That you remembered. I'm so, so sorry."

My heart is pounding hysterically in my chest, trying to escape from inside of me so it doesn't have to feel this aching confusion. I think No. It's not possible. I spent the first month of the summer with her, playing with her, reading with her, learning with her. How can she beâ€¦? She was here, sitting where I'm sitting now. She was here. She was right here.

"No," I breathe out, shaking my head. "You'veâ€¦ you're wrong. She's justâ€¦ she's at camp. She'll be back next week. She told me."

My father's brow furrows when he hears this. "She what? Jackâ€¦ what are you-"

"She was here!" I yell. "I-I played with her! We played together!" My eyes are beginning to burn and I don't want to have to make my father watch me as I cry over something that's not even true. Instead, I turn away from him and start hastily making my way towards the stairs, itching for some proof that they're both wrong and knowing exactly where I can find it. "She's just away at camp," I continue to tell myself. "She'll be back next week. She's fine."

"Jack!" I hear the voice of my mother call after me as I bound up the stairs, skipping every other step. I see out of the corner of my eye as I stride down the hallway both her and my father making their ways up the stairs, an aghast feel in their movements and voices as they call after me. I don't stop for them though, don't slow down. They're wrong, they're both wrong. Emma's not dead. My little Emma is not dead. She's fine. She's got to be.

I get to her bedroom door, which is closed and has been closed since the day she left for camp, no one having any reason to intrude. I wait until my parents are visible down the hallway, both still moving towards me with alarm and hast, and then I swing open the door, taking a step inside as I say, "See! Her room! It's all here! She moved in with us and it's all here!"

Then I look around and my breath catches in my throat.

Her bed and desk are gone, along with her pile of stuffed animals and crayon drawings hanging from the walls. Instead, there are piles and piles of boxes, stacked on top of one another. The walls aren't painted the pastel purple I recall them being, and the blinds are closed shut, keeping every ray of sunlight out of the room.

This isn't the room I remember. The more I stare at it, the more I actually can't remember what her room looked like.

"Jack," I hear a voice say behind me, but I don't turn. All I can keep my eyes on are the boxes, the boxes that weren't here before, but now are. The boxes that are trying to trick me into believing the cruel lie of Emma no longer being here.

This has to be a dream.

This has to be a dream.

This has to be a dream.

I suddenly recall my most recent nightmare. I recall the shadowed figure. I recall Emma's lifeless body.

\_Who said anything about this being a game?\_

"Jack!" someone yells, but I can't tell who it is, because my body has hit the floor and everything's gone pitch black.

## 17. It's Just Going to Take Some Time

**\*\*What? An actual update? What is this sorcery?\*\***

Sorry it took me so freakishly long to update again, guys. I was away for a month in England and Scotland, and then I went and got my wisdom teeth removed. It's been a weird couple of weeks, but I was finally able to finish writing this chapter. Hallelujah!

I'm not sure if there's anything really triggering in this one. I mean, maybe for a slight breakdown, but that's about it.

Thanks for sticking out the dry spells with this story, guys. We only got two more chapters and then we're done! I'm so excited, especially for what I have planned out for our two favorite boys here.

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The day before the race arrives, but the only thing I can think about is building up enough courage to go to Jack's house and confront his mom. Or him. Or whatever is it that's keeping him locked away this time.

It's around midday when I roll up into his gravel driveway. My gloved hands are sweaty against my bike's handles, and it's definitely not just from the heat, but I try my best to ignore them as I dismount. As I make my way towards the front door, what I had planned on saying slowly starts to slip from my memory, causing me to become more nervous than I already am. Just an hour ago, having just finished my mowing for the day, I had somehow convinced myself that this was a good idea; Jack had told me only days before that his mom had claimed to be cool with us being friends now. Now that I'm here though, I can't be too sure.

I think about turning around and going back to my bike. I think about mounting it and pedaling away. I think about going back to my house and lying on my bed and thinking about how sad it is that I can't even ask my best friend's mom if he's okay.

Instead, I knock on the door.

I hear footsteps as I lower my hand, the sound of them going in time

with the thumping of my heart. As the silver doorknob begins to turn, seeming to be moving in slow motion, I take a deep breath, pray to every god I know, and brace myself.

Mrs Overland doesn't look like what I had expected. In my head, I had pictured her towering above me, despite the fact that I know she's no taller than Jack. Her eyes would be filled with hatred, burning with a fire that she would use to vaporize me and turn me into a pile of ash right there on the front porch. She'd hiss and spit and curse at me for even trying to contact her son again, especially after what had happened, and then she'd simply blow my remains away into the wind, like I was never there.

In reality though, she doesn't look huge, but actually very small. Very, very small; maybe even smaller than me. Her chestnut hair, which I had always seen up, is hanging around her shoulders, her eyes not burning with the fire of a thousand suns, but holding something else. Tiredness? Defeat? Vulnerability? Her look could mean any of those things, maybe even all of them, but I can't be sure.

As she moves her gaze towards me, her thin eyebrows raise only a bit, but that's about it when it comes to acknowledging my presence. There doesn't appear to be any form of hostility or aggression, which I guess eases my nerves, even if only by a bit.

"Uh... hi," I say, trying to look as casual as possible. "Is... uh... is Jack?"

"I know why you're here," she says before I can finish. I bite my tongue. I'm sure that this is it - despite her fragile appearance, she still has the energy and motivation to kill me.

To my surprise though, instead of killing me, she moves away from the door, leaving it wide open. As she disappears from sight and into the house, I hear her voice say, "Come in, but take your shoes off. I just vacuumed."

I relax my jaw, relieving the pain in my tongue. "Um... okay..."

I do as I'm told, shutting the door behind me and taking off my shoes and gloves. The air in here is cool and makes me want to lie down and sleep - opposite of the horrid heat outside - but I remind myself that I'm here for a reason. I can see from the foyer that Mrs Overland has moved into the living room, where she stands in front of the backdoor, looking out it. I walk through the room cautiously, not taking my eyes off her until I'm by her side.

He's sitting in a wicker hammock strung up between two large oak trees, his back turned to us. His snow white hair stands out against the leaves and nature like a sore thumb, which makes me smile. Just seeing him awake and in one piece also makes me smile.

"You're not the first person to come and see him," I hear Mrs Overland say beside me. "That sweet Ana girl... she's come over every day since he's woken up to check up on him, make sure he's doing alright. And he just..."

She trails off then, not breaking her stare from her son. I watch her face, watch the muscles as they hold firm under her skin, but it's her eyes that tell me everything. They're broken. Dear gods, they're

so broken. Have they always looked like that? Or is it Jack, watching him, that's making her look like this? I wonder, if I weren't here, if she'd cry.

"Be gentle with him," she tells me. "He's been through a lot lately and he'sâ€¦ well, he's fragile."

I find the courage to speak. "What'd you mean?"

She doesn't say anything, making me wonder if she even heard me. I'm trying to determine if it's worth speaking up again, but then she says, "I think he should be the one to tell you."

I don't know how to respond to that, so I just nod. She sends me what I\_ think\_ is supposed to be a smile, only it quivers a little too much to qualify. She turns then, wandering back into the house, leaving me standing at the backdoor.

Jack doesn't move as I push open the door and shut it behind me, despite the fact that it creaks like crazy somewhere in between both actions. I can't see his face, but I can see through his clothes that he's grown thinner and paler - if that's even possible. Even his snow white hair, usually defying gravity, seems to be dead against his scalp.

"Jack?" I say as I approach him. The grass is cool against my bare foot, though I do notice that it's getting a little long. "You, uhâ€¦ you okay, buddy?"

He jumps a little at the sound of my voice, causing the hammock to rock, but he doesn't turn to face me. I take his reaction as a sign that I have his attention.

"So, umâ€¦ your mom let me in. And we, like, \_talked,"\_ I tell him, hoping that that would get something out of him. When it doesn't, I take a deep breath and continue. "Well, I mean, we didn't really \_talk\_ talk\_. She did most of the talking. I just kindaâ€¦ noddedâ€¦ I guessâ€¦ I dunno. But she said something about, uhâ€¦ about you 'going through a lot lately'. What's that about?"

I notice his shoulders rising and falling as he breathes, but other than that, he's completely still. I decide to change the subject, but only by a bit.

"Fish and I were talking about you the other day. Like, about where you were. We hadn't heard from you in a couple days and we wereâ€¦ well, we were kinda worried. But you, uhâ€¦ you \_seem\_ fineâ€¦"

Once again: nothing. Dear Odin. It's usually hard to get this kid to shut up, and now I'm having to work to get him to talk? \_That's\_ not concerning or anything.

"Your mom told me Tooth's been here to see you. I can only \_imagine\_ how worried she must be. And, likeâ€¦ Astrid's worried too. She hasn't right out said it, no, but, likeâ€¦ I meanâ€¦ I can tell. But we haven't really talked about it muchâ€¦ you know, what happened down at the stream. We've been so busy with practicing for the race tomorrow and... yeah. The race is tomorrow, by the way. You know. The race against Lout."

He sniffs. That's the reply I get. That's it.

Okay, I know he can hear me; how the hell couldn't he, I'm standing right here. He's just deciding to be a jerk or whatever and ignoring my attempts to get him to talk. Well, fine. If you want to play that way, Overland, I guess we can play that way.

Crossing my arms and adding a little edge to my voice, I say, "This conversation is feeling very one sided." When he once again doesn't reply, I let out a groan, looking up to the heavens for some strength. "Jack. Oh my gods. Talk to me. Please. I've been, like, dying to talk to you and see how you've been doin' for the last couple days, and now I'm here, and you're just, shutting me out. And it's kinda aggravated. No, scratch that. It's really aggravating. Your mom was describing you as 'fragile' and that's, like, really concerning and I wanna know what's up, but you're just being a jerk friend and not talking to me, and since when did you even do that? Like, that's the kinda thing that Astrid would do, not you. And let me tell you, I don't wanna have to deal with another Astrid, because one is-

"I'm sorry."

The words come out so faintly and so hoarse - it sounds like he hasn't spoken in days - that I can barely make them out. He hasn't turned to face me yet, but I can see him beginning to look over his shoulder, like he wants to; I want to reach out, grab him, and make him look at me.

"It's, like, it's okay," I say instead, feeling calmer now that he's actually said something. "Just, can you tell me what's wrong? I wanna know what's wrong."

That's when he shifts his weight to face me. He turns, causing the hammock to rock, and when he stops, I can see the faint redness surrounding the raw edges of his eyes, the once electric blue of them turned stagnant. He's wearing this baggy shirt that looks like something I'd only be caught mowing in, and his hands - man, I've never seen hands shake that fast before.

He looks like he's about to lose it any second now.

I take that as my cue to step - leap's more of the accurate verb here, actually - towards him. His eyes only break from following me as he reaches up and wipes what I notice are tears away with the back of his hand.

"What's wrong?" I ask, now seated beside him.

"It's, like, it's Emma." Gods, his voice sounds awful.

"What happened to her? Is she alright?"

He squeezes his eyes shut, a pained grimace appearing on his face, making it look like he's just sucked on a lemon. "It's, like, it's all my fault," he tells me. "Everything. If I had just, she'd, it's just not fair, Hiccup. If I had just-

"Woah, woah, woah there." I reach out and place my hand on his shoulder. His body tenses up immediately at the touch, so I move my

hand away; so much for physical comfort. "Let's, uhâ€¦ let's take a step back here, alright? What's your fault exactly? What isn't fair? You gotta fill me in or-"

"There was this stream," he suddenly starts before I can finish.

I stare at him, confused. "What?"

"A stream."

"You meanâ€¦ the one we were at? With Tooth and Astrid?"

"No. Aâ€¦ a different stream. The stream where I lost my memory."

"Waitâ€¦ where youâ€¦ \_what\_?"

And so he fills me in. It's odd, hearing Jack describe something so detailed - especially about something that had happened before he lost his memory. As he speaks, it's like he's in some type of a trance - like he isn't even really himself anymore, but is whoever he was before he was Jack. The words spill out of him as if he's seeing it all being played out in his head. He remembers which way the wind was blowing. He remembers the shade of Emma's dress. He remembers the sound of wet pebbles underfoot.

He remembers.

He had said he had remembered everything; during that brief moment of consciousness, he had told me so. I guess I had been so caught up on making sure he wasn't going to die or something that I completely overlooked it.

His voice is smoother sounding now, yet still weak, like at any moment his words could break into a million pieces. He tells me how Emma had slipped and how he had dove for her and how he had hit his head saving her life. I notice his hands begin to shake again at saying her name. What he's telling me seems like it should all be a good thing - I mean, he saved his little sister's life - but his body language is telling me otherwise.

Then he tells me what his dad had told him: what had been happening when he was lying in that shallow stream, alone and soaked in his own blood. It had been a group of hikers that had saved his life, not Emma. She never managed to find the help he needed, because her body was too busy lying in the middle of the road, just as broken as his.

"Jackâ€¦ "

"Apparently the driver hadn't seen her coming," he tells me, wiping his eyes again with the back of his quivering hand. "She had been so worried about finding help for me thatâ€¦ that she forgot to look both ways."

"Oh godsâ€¦ "

"And it's all because of me. If I hadn't hit my head. If I hadn't given her a reason to run to get help. Then she's still be alive. She'd still be here and alive and happy and-"



"What? No. Jack, that's not true," I argue, getting up from the hammock and turning to face him, my hand running through my hair as I try to piece together his confusing thought process. He looks like he's about to protest, but I decide to not give him that chance. "How could you have known? I meanâ€¦ there's no way you could've known that that one thing would lead to all of that other stuff. No one could've."

"But if-" He looks lost, but I can see what looks like anger growing behind his eyes.

"No, listen. Things justâ€¦ things just happen sometimes, y'know. And sometime we don't have control over what those things are. And you can't go around blaming yourself for something you couldn't control."

"You don't understand," he says through gritted teeth, jumping up from the hammock and stepping in front of me. He's a whole head taller, and the irritation resting in his eyes makes him actually look intimidating, like he could punch me in the stomach right now if he really wanted to. "I was her brother. It was my job to look after her and I failed her. If I had justâ€¦"

His whole body begins to shake this time as he trails off. Before I can say or do anything, he stumbles and falls back to sitting on the hammock again, planting his face in his palms. The redness that had once been just surrounding the rims of his eyes has spread to his cheeks and ears now. I want to comfort him, but his body is trembling like crazy, and I don't want him to withdraw from my advances again, like when I had tried to touch his shoulder earlier.

So I just stand there and watch him break.

"Jackâ€¦"

"If I had just been more careful," I hear him whimper into his hands. "If I had just warned her about the slippery rocks, none of this would've happened."

"But you didn't know there were slippery rocks. Neither of you did."

"You don't understand."

"Wellâ€¦ then make me understand. Explain it to me."

Removing his face from his hands, he quickly wipes a series of tears from his flushed cheeks. He looks over towards me, his eyes looking more alive than before, but in the worse kind of way.

"Iâ€¦ I can't," he tells me. "It'sâ€¦ it's hard to explain."

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There's a silence between us. Hiccup's piercing green-yellow eyes are

staring into me, a stare I eventually have to break because holding it becomes too difficult.

I can't help but wonder what must be going through that mind of his right now. Have I got him? Has he given up with trying to reason with me? Part of me wishes this to be true, since I'm tired of quarreling with him - and just tired in general. The other part of me though hopes that his brain is ticking, thinking in overdrive of the words that he could use to make me feel better, even if I don't know what they are myself.

"No," he finally says. "It's not hard to explain."

I look back up at him, still standing where I had left him.

"I know exactly what you're going through. I'veâ€| geez, Jack. I've lived this. I know exactly how you feel."

His eyes, only a moment ago clouded with thoughts of what to say, are now clear and full of what looks like understanding. He claims he knows how I feel. I'm intrigued by this, but also a little agitated - I'm allowed to feel agitated, right? You know, at his seemingly magical comprehension of the situation.

"How could you know?" I ask, maybe a little more contentious than I had attended. "You've never lost someone. Not like this. Not like-"

"Yes, I have."

His expression confuses me; I can't tell if what he's referring to is something that he's okay with or not, and the urge to question him on it builds increasingly large inside of me. Before I can say a word though, he's already stepping back towards the hammock, returning to his seat on my left. He leans forwards once he's settled, resting his elbows on his thighs as I hear him let out a tiny sigh.

"I've never actually told you why my mom's not around anymore, have I?" he asks.

I suddenly feel stupid.

His mother. I should've known.

"No," I whisper. "You've always spoken of her in the past tense. I justâ€| I assumed she'd left when you were little."

"She left, oh yeah. But in aâ€| a different kinda way."

"How different?"

"Iâ€| wellâ€|" He closes his tired looking eyes and lets out another sigh. I'm about to tell him he doesn't have to tell me if he doesn't want to, but he continues before I can. "I had been at Fish's house, playing, and she had called to tell me to come home. Y'know, for dinner. Wellâ€| I didn't want to, because I was having such a good time and stuff. Astrid had actually laughed at something I had said, right? And for an eight-year-old with a crush, that meant everything."

"So, she told me to head home, and I told her I didn't want to. Instead of arguing with me, she said she was gonna come pick me up, and, wellâ€¦ that was the last time I ever heard her voice, because, on her way to pick me upâ€¦ there was this truck that ran the stop sign andâ€¦ we heard it from down the blockâ€¦ andâ€¦ yeah. That's what happened. That's how she died."

All I can think of to say is "I'm sorry," so I do. He just nods, like this is all routine for him - which, I suppose, it is.

I'm afraid he's going to be the one to breakdown now, just like I had done, but he surprises me and stays calm and collected. Sure, I can tell he's fighting his emotions with the way he's blinking a whole bunch and refusing to make eye contact with me, but he's handling it a lot better than I had been. Though that may be because he has more practice than I do.

"And for seven years, I was convinced I could've stopped it from happening," he goes on, his voice staying impressively sturdy. "I was so sure that if I had just walked home, she'd be alive today. I'd have a mom and my dad would have a wife and we'd be a family and just... everything would be alright."

"Yeah, butâ€¦ that doesn't make it your fault," I tell him. "You were just a kid. You didn't-"

"I know," I hear him say, letting out an unexpected laugh with his words. "I know I didn't know, and that's what I'm trying to tell you, you idiot. It wasn't my fault, and it's not your fault. Hell, in the end, it's no one's fault."

He's smiling at me - a weak one, but a smile nonetheless. I know I can't just leave him hanging there - not after everything he's just told me - so I tell him I get it: it's no one's fault, even if it seems like it is.

"Butâ€¦ how did you deal withâ€¦ with this?"

"With what?"

"You know. Thisâ€¦ this feeling." I gesture to my chest, hoping he understands what I mean.

"You mean the grief?"

"Umâ€¦ yeah. Because it hurts."

"Well, of course it hurts. You'd probably be some sorta superhuman if it didn't. Or at least a sociopath."

"A what?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing. What I'm saying is that, yeah, it's gonna hurt, but you just gottaâ€¦ you just gotta learn to deal with it, y'know."

I ask him how, and he tells me about his father, both depressed and unsure of how to deal with the casualty of losing his wife, boxing up all of her belongings and storing them anywhere but in the open. All the pictures on the walls, all the favorite mugs and dishes and

sweaters and shoes - all gone, like they had never been there to begin with. The only thing that he managed to leave behind was the feeling of her presence; the presence that lingered as Hiccup grew older; the presence that would never really go away.

"And then he found those old boxes while cleaning out the garage," he tells me, a smile spreading across his face again as if he's recalling the memory. "They had had everything in them. All the pictures and clothes. Everything. Even that stupid stuffed dragon she had made me."

"You have one of the pictures in your room," I point out.

"Yeah."

"Soâ€¦ you've moved on?"

"Well, you never really move on from something like that. You justâ€¦ you just learn to accept it, y'know?"

Accept it. I stare down at my white hands and remember waking up in a hospital bed and seeing them for the first time. I remember looking passed those hands and seeing Emma for the first time. I remember seeing Emma for the last time; for the real last time, through blood stained water.

"You just gotta learn to accept itâ€¦" I whisper.

"Yep."

The pressure of his hand on my shoulder surprises me, but this time I don't flinch it away, like I had accidentally done before. His fingers feel firm against my shoulder blade, like he's holding on to me for support. Or maybe like he's trying to tell me I have him for support. Either way, it feels reassuring, feeling his touch; feeling him there at my side.

"Thanks, Hiccup."

"Johnathan."

"Hm?"

"My real name's Johnathan."

At first, all I hear is a name coming from his lips; like he's calling out to someone else. Johnathan. I've heard that name somewhere - actually, I've probably read it somewhere, considering I don't know that many people.

Then I really think about what he's telling me - his real name - his real name - Johnathan. And suddenly, everything feels just a little sideways.

"Jack? Are you okay?" he asks, a hint of a chuckle in his clearly amused voice. "Stop doing that thing with your eyes, dude. You look like a demented fish."

"Your real name's Johnathan?" I ask.

"Uh, yeah." He does his trademark eye roll, shaking his head as he lets another little laugh escape his lips. "You didn't \_really\_ think my name was Hiccup, did you?"

"Wellâ€¦ no."

"Okay, good."

"But why are you telling me this?"

He merely shrugs. "I figured I'd tell ya the truth since you kinda know everything else about me now. I mean, I've told you the story of how I lost my leg, I've told you about all my daddy issues. And now you know what happened to my mom. Sooooo, naturally, I think you've kinda leveled up enough on The Friend Scale to know what my real name is."

"The Friend Scale?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

He narrows his eyes. "Don't mock me, Overland."

"But you told me you didn't remember your real name."

"I did?" He seems baffled by this idea, yet a little amused at the same time. "When was that?"

"When I asked you that one time after getting lemonade. You know, from Jamie and Sophie. You said people had been calling you Hiccup for so long that--"

"Oh my gods, Jack, \_I was kidding.\_ That was a \_joke.\_" He reaches up and covers his face with his hands, like he can't even look at me he's feeling such secondhand embarrassment. I can hear him laugh from in between his fingers though, so I allow myself to laugh a little too, at my own expense. It feels good, laughing.

"My real name isn't Jack," I decide to tell him. He looks up from his hands, actually looking a little surprised. "Yeah. I chose out the name Jack a couple days after I woke up. My real name's Christopher."

"Christopher?"

"Yeah."

He makes a face, one that tells me that he obviously disapproves of the name. "You don't seem like a Christopher to me. You're just too much of a Jack."

"And \_you\_ don't seem like a Johnathan," I admit. "You're just too much of a Hiccup."

"Which is kinda sad."

"I think it's fine. It suits you."

"Thanks, I guess?"

All of the sudden, the sound of something vibrating fills the air. We

both glance towards Hiccup's pocket at the same time, which is where the sound is coming from, and he fishes his hand in to retrieve his cell phone. After pressing a couple buttons, his eyes scanning over whatever it is that is on the screen, he turns towards me and says, "I, uhâ€¦ I kinda gotta go. Astrid and I are gonna practice some more for the race tomorrow."

The race he has tomorrow with Lout becomes front and center in my mind, and I can't believe I had nearly forgotten about it. I guess this whole Emma fiasco has just taken over my life as of late - and with good reason - so everything else just seems second.

"Will you, uhâ€¦ will you be there tomorrow? At the race?"

My train of thought is broken by Hiccup's voice bringing me back into my backyard. He's standing now, shoving his cell phone back into his pocket, a look on his face that tells me that he really wants me to say yes, but he's not sure that I will.

I decide to comply with his hope. "Of course I'll be there."

He grins, his eyes lighting up and those crooked front teeth of his becoming visible. "\_Great\_", he goes. "That's great. I'll, uhâ€¦ I'll see you there then. It's at noon andâ€¦ well, you know all that stuff."

"Yeah."

"Okay. Cool."

"Yeah."

I hear his cell phone vibrate again in his pocket, and he rolls his eyes. "\_Astrid\_. She justâ€¦ I really gotta go or she's gonna, like, tie my fingers to the spokes of my bike. You know how she is."

"No, it's fine," I tell him, waving him off towards the backdoor nonchalantly. "Go have fun on your little date."

"It's not a date," he tells me, though the way he looks down at his feet tells me he wishes otherwise.

"You just keep telling yourself that, Hic."

He shakes his head at me, running his fingers through his hair as he begins to turn to leave. "Has anyone ever told you that you're the worst? Because, quite franklyâ€¦ you're the worst."

"Well, I've only learned from the best."

"You really need to stop saying that."

We say our final goodbyes, and I watch him march towards the backdoor and into my house, the door only making a slight click as it's shut all the way. There's a skip in his step as he goes and I notice it and it takes some weight off of my shoulders, if only by a couple of ounces. It makes all the difference though.

Hiccup had said that this whole "grieving" thing is going to take some time, and I believe that. Despite the fact that I've gotten what

happened off of my chest, I can still feel the loss of Emma tugging at my heart, making me want to just hide away in my room, curtains pulled and door locked, for however long it'll take to move on. I know I can't do that though. I can't do that to my parents, I can't do that to my friends, but most importantly, I can't do that to myself. I've made it this far - I survived - and I'm not going to waste the extra time I'm getting on moping around over something I can't even change.

If Hiccup can eventually learn to accept the death of his mother, than I can eventually learn to accept this.

It's just going to take some time.

## 18. A Kid That Likes to Ride Bikes

**\*\*Can anyone say "pain in the ass chapter to write"? Because PAIN IN THE ASS CHAPTER TO WRITE.\*\***

I think this was the longest wait you guys have ever had to endure with this fic. And for that, I am truly sorry. My only excuse this time around is that college is a pain that I'm still learning to adapt to, so please bear with me during this transition period. Though, admittedly, there is only one chapter left, so I guess that means no more waits after this last one?

SPEAKING OF WHICH.

Yeah, guys. So the next update is the last chapter. Wow. I hope you guys are ready for some closure, 'cause that's what you're gonna get.

Thank you all for the new followers and for writing me such sweet reviews. Every letter you guys type is deeply appreciated.

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If I were to say that I'm not nervous for this race against Lout, than I'd definitely be lying.

I thought maybe reconnecting with Jack yesterday would help calm my nerves, but it didn't. Okay, maybe a little, but not as much as I had hoped. Falling asleep last night required a lot of more willpower than I'd like to admit, and when I finally did, my dreams all had to do with me having to race Lout with only my good leg, which had me waking up in a cold sweat.

To make matters worse, when I told my dad during breakfast that I'd be out racing today, he decided to get all fatherly supportive about it, asking me if I needed anything or if I wanted him to be there. In the long run, I do appreciate it, but since I had just woken up from a tough night's sleep, I wasn't necessarily in the mood to be showered with attention. It is progress though.

Digging up my old racing gear from the depths of the garage was a

pain, and Toothless wouldn't leave me alone as I filled up my water bottle and tied my shoes. If I were smart, I would've used all these obstacles as excuses for me not to race today. Then again, racing Lout I feel is inevitable, so why even bother with excuses.

Half an hour later, I'm sitting in Fish's still nacho-smelling car, my bike hitched up to the back as we pull to a halt, signaling that we've arrived at the racing grounds. Fish twists and takes his keys from the ignition, stepping out of the car without a word. I do the same, fiddling with my long-since-used helmet and other gear, all resting in my arms. Since my hands are full, Fish unhitches my bike for me, gently placing it on the dirt ground between us.

"You nervous?" he asks. I see him peer down at the royal red Night\_Fury I had spray painted on the top tube of my bike some time ago, allowing himself to grin at the sight of it.

"Yeah," I answer. "And a little tired too."

"Yeah, you look tired. Are you sure you wanna do this?"

"Do I have a choice?"

He shrugs his broad shoulders. "I guess that's up to you."

I look over towards the abandoned carnival grounds that I'm about to race in, the incomplete ferris wheel and roller coaster track sticking up over the horizon. Down there right now is Lout, probably putting on all his gear and determined to beat me into the ground, figuratively and probably literally as well.

Turning to face Fish, who's taken it upon himself to bend over to study the new addition to my bike, I say, "If I'm gonna die, at least I'll be doing what I love, right?"

He smiles back up at me, and then replies with, "Yeah, except you're not gonna die. You're a born racer, Hic. You're gonna cream Lout, that's what you're gonna do."

I sigh. "Gods, I sure hope you're right, Fish."

We make our way through the locked front gates, traveling down the main street to where I remember the starting line being. There's a good two dozen kids hanging around for the race to start, sitting in the shade of the carny stands and sipping out of their water bottles. I don't think I've ever seen this many people show up for a race before.

The first identifiable person I see is Lout. He's standing off near the starting line, that ridiculous ram helmet of his already on his head as both Ruff and Tuff accompany him. When they see me, Tuff actually sends me a nod, and Ruff a lopsided smile and a thumbs up. Lout notices this of course; how could he not when they're standing right beside him. He snaps at them, and though Tuff looks a little ashamed for being caught fraternizing with the enemy, Ruff merely sends him an annoyed glare that tells him to piss off.

Everyone's already waiting for us as we arrive. Cami, who had gotten here earlier with Jack and Tooth, comes bounding up when she sees me, a toothy grin plastered on her freckled face. She grabs my helmet



from out of my hands, puts it on her head, and says, "You've got a big head, Burp. It's a wonder you're not smarter than you are with a head this big."

I lift the helmet from off of her mess of blonde hair. "Thanks for your support, Cami. I knew inviting you would help with my self-esteem."

She then bounces off to go bother Fish, who still has my bike, allowing Tooth to approach me. She's carrying what I recognize as her first-aid kit from her car and is wearing a rather anxious look on her face.

"You look exhausted, Hiccup," she blatantly points out in this motherly way, more than likely referring to the light outlines of bags that have developed under my eyes as of this morning. "Are you sure you wanna do this? I mean, you don't have to."

"He's gonna do it," I hear Fish call out from over my shoulder.

"And he's gonna win!" Cami adds on.

Tooth looks worriedly up at me, awaiting my answer. My response is, "What they said."

"I justâ€¦ I don't know if that's smart though," she tells me, looking even more bother about all of this than just a couple of seconds ago - if that's even possible. "I mean, I just saw what this Lout guy looks like, and I can easily say that I don't like the looks of him. Not to say that you're not a good racer, Hiccup, because I'm sure you are, but I just would feel more comfortable knowing that-"

"Tooth, take a breath."

Jack suddenly appears out of thin air, stepping up behind Tooth and lightly grabbing her shoulder with his white hand.

"I'll make sure he remembers to put on his helmet before the race starts, alright?" he tells her gently.

"But Jack-"

"He's gonna be fine. Believe me."

Tooth, not appearing to trust Jack's words completely, looks like she's about to start protesting some more. Astrid, who, like Jack, I hadn't even seen arrive, swoops in before she can though.

"You know, you look a little dehydrated, Tooth," the blonde points out matter-of-factly, mocking a concerned look. "We should go get you some water. It'd be a pity if you were to pass out while watchin' your first bike race."

Tooth looks a little jostled by Astrid's sudden presence. "Ohâ€¦ well, I meanâ€¦ I guess I feel a little-"

Astrid takes a hold of Tooth's arm before she can even finish her sentence, dragging the worry wart of a girl towards the water coolers while going into some ramble about how seventy-five percent of

Americans are considered chronically dehydrated. I remind myself to thank Astrid after this whole race is over and done with.

Once the two girls are out of ear shot, Jack leans in and says, "Please don't get hurt. She'll never trust me again."

I shot him a look. "Hey, I didn't tell you to lie to her. If I get hurt, I get hurt. Her trust is one hundred percent your problem."

"Ahhh, you're no fun."

Since the last time I've seen him, Jack does look like he's improved a bit, at least physically. He still has bags matching mine under his eyes and his skin is still a couple of shades lighter than usual. There does seem to be more bounce in his hair and emotion in his eyes than yesterday though, so I take those as good signs.

"How ya doing?" I ask hesitantly.

The smile he had been wearing on his face fades as I say the words. I wish I could take them back.

"Uhâ€¦ allâ€¦ alright, I guess," he gets out as he looks at the ground, reaching up and running his hand through his disheveled hair. "I meanâ€¦ not much has really changed since you last saw me, soâ€¦"

"You're here though," I point out. "That's different."

The smile from before reappears on his face, and though it's still weak, at least it's something. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess you're right."

Fish wanders up to us then, my bike wheeling smoothly beside him and an excited looking Cami trailing on his other side. He informs me all serious like that the race is about to begin, so I better get to the starting line.

The reality of the situation suddenly sets in. "W-what? \_Already\_?" I pull out my phone to see that it's only five minutes until noon. "But I haven't prepped my bike yet. I need time to-"

"\_Weeeee\_ already did!" Cami tells me as she jumps up on to my bike's seat in one hop. "And let me just tell you that she's in tip-top shape! Ready to race!"

"\_He\_," I tell her shortly. "It'sâ€¦ it's a he."

"You're bikes a \_guy\_?" Cami asks, stifling out a laugh.

"Bikes have \_genders\_?" Jack asks, sounding puzzled.

"Justâ€¦ just forget it. Forget it." I take my helmet from under my arm and place it on my head, clipping the woven straps under my chin and readjusting it so it doesn't bother my ears.

"You look like a dork," Cami tells me as I pull on my gloves.

"Thanks."

Fish decides to head over to the sidelines then - there's only so many actual good spots to stand in where you can see the entire race track, and Fish is always one to try and nab it before it's gone. He wishes me luck, then adds after a beat that I don't need it, and gives me a pat on the back so hard, I nearly fall flat on my face.

Cami, looking like she's about to burst from the seams in excitement, runs up to me and gives me a quick, unexpected hug around my waist.

"You better win this thing, Burp," she tells me sternly, unraveling herself from her embrace. "Show that Lout guy he can't mess with the evil Dragon Knapper and her bestest ally, the dorky Dragon Trainer, alright?"

I ruffle her hair as I promise her I'll try my best. "No one can mess with us without gettin' a few burns, right?" I put up my hand for a high five, to which she enthusiastically returns spot on.

Tooth and Astrid both walk up then with water bottles in their hands. Tooth, not looking as worried as before, wishes me good luck, telling me that she knows I'll do great. Astrid punches me playfully in the shoulder, saying, "You better win this, Haddock," winking at me before turning away to follow the other girls.

"You need help with those?"

I turn to see that Jack is still standing beside me, not showing any desire to leave my side quite yet. His hands are reaching out towards the knee pads in my hands, so I reply by passing them his way.

"There isn't really anything I can say that you haven't already heard," I hear him tell me as he bends down and starts applying my left knee pad to its appropriate knee. "I meanâ€¦ good luck? You'd better win? Uhâ€¦ please don't die?"

"No one's told me not to die yet," I inform him as I strap on one of my elbow pads.

"Well, okay. Please don't die then."

"I'll try my best."

He straightens back up, and I say thanks, but he doesn't seem to be able to meet me halfway; he just mumbles out a barely coherent "you're welcome".

"Hey," I go, moving to where he has to look at me. "What's wrong? We were just jokin' around a second ago. Did I say something wrong?"

"No, no. I justâ€¦ Iâ€¦" He sighs, looking up and finally locking eyes with me. "Canâ€¦ can I be honest about something real fast?"

"Uhâ€¦ yeah, sure." I'm a little frightened of what he might say.

He doesn't start explaining himself right away; he has a look on his face that tells me his brain is reeling for the right words, so I let him think them over. Finally, after a moment, he says, "Iâ€¦ I was actually a little worried about this race, to be honest. I know that sounds stupid, since I've seen you race and have even raced against you, but it stillâ€¦ I was still bothered by it. Astrid's right when she says that Lout bikes dirty, and though I'd easily admit that you're faster and smarter on your bike than he is, that doesn't mean he has any less of a chance at beating you orâ€¦ or worse.

"But it's weird. Now that I'm here... wellâ€¦ I'm not that worried anymore."

"Really?" I ask.

He sends me a weak smile and a nod as an answer.

I turn my gaze out to the gravel racing track in front of us. It's the first time I've laid eyes on it - my old middle school playground - in what feels like nearly forever. When was the last time I raced here? Two? Three years ago? Odin, I can't even remember. Looking at it though - every little obstacle that I know I'm about to face, all coming back into my memory - gives me some confidence that I thought I had lost. The bags under my eyes are suddenly not as heavy as they had felt this morning.

"I was worried too," I admit to him. "But now that I'm here, now that I have my gear on and I'm on my bike. I dunno. I think I can do this." Looking back towards my friend, I see that he's already smiling - and this time it's a real smile.

Dagur - the bizarre, tattooed looking senior that deals with and coordinates the races in Berk - announced that the race is about to begin, so each racer needs to receive their token of luck.

I see out of the corner of my eye Lout lean over towards an impatient looking Ruff, expecting a kiss on the helmet from her, I suppose. She - bless her - just swats his face away and heads over towards the sidelines. Tuff doesn't even try to hide his laughs from Lout as he follows suit.

"Man, was that a rejection or what," I hear Jack say with a laugh, having seen the same thing as me.

"Yeah. Looks like Lout's not racing with any luck today."

"And neither are you. Unless you want me to get Astrid."

"Don't go there, Jack."

"Well, if you're going to be that way, you're not going to get any luck either. I mean, I'm definitely not kissing you on the helmet."

"Good, 'cause I don't want you to."

"Good, 'cause I don't want to either."

Dagur starts explaining the rules we all already know by heart, which

is Jack's cue to head over towards the sidelines. He gives me a quick squeeze on the shoulder before he hurries off to the cluster of people waiting for the race to begin. Before turning completely away from me though, I do notice him mouth what I think is a "you've got this", which makes an extra shot of energy pulse through me.

"When I say go!" Dagur yells down at us. "Readyâ€¦!"

I take a deep breath, not even bothering to look at Lout stationed a couple of yards away from me, since I know that would be stupid on my part. I close my eyes instead and focus all my new found energy into my legs and arms.

This is it. This is the moment that I've been working towards these last couple of years; years of having to stand on the sidelines as all the other kids raced - it all ends here. I am on this track now, and I am ready to show them how you're supposed to race a bike.

"Setâ€¦!"

This is what I was meant to do.

"GO!"

I release my brakes, pushing my left leg forward as hard as I can, rolling over the starting line - all before Lout can even lift a finger. I don't dare look over my shoulder to see where he is behind me, but the sharp cheers of our tiny audience growing smaller and smaller behind me tells me that I'm in the lead so far.

As I swerve around the first corner, I can hear Lout's tires against the gravel making its way closer to me. In response, I push myself forward, leaning over my handlebars so that I'm out of his range.

I dodge left and right around corners, over the unfilled pipeline holes and under the rotting support beams of the food court. Lout's right behind me the entire time, sometimes getting a little too close to my back tire for my liking, but I try my best to ignore him. I pretend I'm just biking around the neighborhood, just me and the open road - only this road is not quite as smooth and curves a lot more. As the wind blows through my hair, I smile. I can't believe I waited this long to race again.

The race hasn't even been going on for two minutes when Lout decides to make his first move. It's partially my fault, considering I'm somewhat lost in my own world as he tries to side swipe me and misses, only causing me to wobble a bit on my tires. The distracting does give him enough time to get a lead on me though.

"Lout!" I yell after him, steadying myself. His head whips back, allowing me to see his face from under his helmet, which I can see holds a smug smirk. Before I can yell anything else, he leans forward and advances even further ahead of me.

Alright. Time to get down to business.

I manage to gain on him - probably the doing of the gods, I'm sure - getting to the point where we're riding side by side at the same pace. He keeps glancing over at me as my front tire begins to get in

the lead of his, a disgusted look in his eyes as we briefly make eye contact. He swerves to the side, barely nicking my back tire before I'm somehow able to swerve away, my hands firmly planted on my handlebars to keep steady.

"Why are you doing this, Lout?" I shout at him, feeling my face growing hot with not only frustration, but anger. I knew Lout biked dirty - he kind of always has - but not this dirty.

He doesn't even look over at me as I hear him say, "I have to win this race," through gritted teeth.

"Yeah, but do you have to do it by cheating?"

"You don't understand!"

This was definitely not the response I had been expecting from him, so I'm caught slightly off guard. "Iâ€ wait, what? What do you mean I don't-"

"Oh, don't play dumb, Haddock!" he yells at me, his eyes still on the track. We're both still biking, now at more the same pace as one another, but our speed has decreased to a steady roll. "You know exactly what I mean! Everyone knows that, before you got that stupid racing bike of yours back in the sixth grade, I was the best biker in Berk! Then you had to come along and steal all my glory!"

"I just wanted to bike with you guys," I try to explain. "I wasn't trying to-"

"Well, you did! As soon as you got on that bike, you were the best and everyone knew it! And everyone forgot about poor, old Lout Jorgenson, because stupid Hiccup Haddock was faster than him and could beat 'im in a race!"

"Lout, I didn't-"

"And then you had that bike accident that landed you that metal leg and no bike, which finally gave me my chance to be number one again! And everything was great for me for a while, but noooo. You just couldn't stay away, could you? You just had to come back and start impressin' people with your new, fancy bike and your new, fancy metal leg, didn't cha?"

I don't even remember telling my hand to do it, but I feel my fingers suddenly curl around my handle brake, causing me to pull to an abrupt stop. To my surprise, Lout does the same, only stopping a couple of yards ahead of me. I'm expecting him to jump off his bike and come charging, but he doesn't. He just turns himself back to face me, this shocked, yet still upset expression on his face as he stands there, bike underneath him.

"Isâ€ is that why you're always so mean to me?" I ask, finally finding my voice. "Becauseâ€ because I'm a better biker than you?"

"Well, yeah!" he goes, turning more in my direction, the shock from me stopping mid-race still printed on his face. "Biking means everything here in Berk - you know that. And being beaten by a

scrawny little hiccup like you is \_embarrassing\_."

"I can imagine," I say under my breath. "But, Lout. Gods, if you had just \_told\_ me-"

"Told you what? That I was jealous of you? HA!"

"No, notâ€¦ wellâ€¦ yes, maybe. I justâ€¦ I just assumed all these years you just hated me to \_hate\_ me, not because of the fact that I was better at biking than you. I meanâ€¦ geez, if I had known that, I may have even offered to give you a few pointers."

At this point, Lout's no longer standing over his bike like when we had stopped, but is resting on his bike's seat. He doesn't appear to give off any sign of wanting to finish this race though; he just looks more confused than anything.

"Wait. R-really?" he asks.

"Well, yeah. I meanâ€¦ Lout, we're \_cousins\_. \_We're the same \_blood\_, whether we wanna be or not\_. \_And though we get on each other's nerves-"

"Yeah, you have no idea."

"\_And though we get on each other's nerves\_, that doesn't mean I wouldn't have helped you. I mean, the fact that we both happen to love biking is super cool in itself, but instead of trying to work together and stuff, we've just-"

"Become enemies," he finishes for me.

"Well, I wouldn't go as far as to say \_enemies\_, \_since it isn't really normal for people to have enemies to begin with, but, umâ€¦ yeah. That's the basic idea."

He doesn't say anything to that; at least not right away. I can tell he's thinking over my words, looking down at the ground, his brow furrowed. He then suddenly looks up at me and says, "Iâ€¦ I've never really thought about it that way before."

I smile, and for the first time, I don't feel a knot form in my chest from the mere sight of him. For the first time, I see him exactly as he is: just a kid, like me, that likes to ride his bike.

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"Guys, where'd they go?"

Cami is the first to note that Hiccup and Lout have disappeared, since she's seated well above everyone else on my shoulders. As soon as she points this out, everyone around us, including myself, cranes their necks to get a better view of the track.

"What's wrong?" I hear Tooth ask beside me. She's holding her first-aid kit firmly to her chest, the antsiness that she had been

trying so desperately to hide from Hiccup reappearing on her face.  
"Is Hiccupâ€¦ did Loutâ€¦?"

"I don't know," is all I can say. The words taste sour in my mouth.

"Dude, Lout's probably beaten Hiccup into the ground by now," I hear someone say with a laugh behind me.

"Yeah, and it wouldn't take much, seein' as the kid's literally a stick, right?" another person adds on jokingly.

I snap. Looking over my shoulder, I hiss, "Shut the hell up." I don't dwell on the two jerks long enough though to catch their reactions, since worry is beginning to grow inside of me at an alarming rate.

I feel Cami pat me on the head. When I peer up at her, she smiles down at me and says, "Good one."

"They were supposed to have come around that corner by now," I hear Fish explain, pointing at the corner of the broken down bumper cars tent. The hitch in his voice tells me he's trying to hardest to contain his worry for his friend. "It shouldn't be taking this long. They should've rounded that corner by now."

"Do you thinkâ€¦?" Tooth begins to ask, then trails off, not wanting to finish her sentence.

I look down to notice Astrid, who surprisingly hasn't said a word yet, and the look on her face scares me as soon as I see it. Her wide, blue eyes are darting around the track as she lifts herself up on her toes to see over everyone, holding this uncertain look in them as she searches for that auburn hair on that black bike. They land up on me when they're unable to find what they're looking for, and I've never seen her look at anyone like she's looking at me right now. There's fear in her eyes, a pure, horrifying fear that tells me that we're thinking the exact same thing.

I take Cami down from my shoulders, her protesting against it, but me ignore her. Astrid doesn't even wait for me to have the small girl planted securely on the ground, for by the time I've straightened back up, all I can see is her blonde braid flying behind her as she darts out of the crowd and towards the bumper cars.

"Jack!" I hear Tooth call after me as I take off. I want to turn back around and explain myself, but I know that just those couple of seconds it would take to do so could be what determines Hiccup's wellbeing.

I hope he's alright.

The run to the bumper cars feels like it takes a lifetime. Every step I take feels like someone's delivering a bat to my stomach head on, and I can feel hot tears forming at the rims of my eyes. I try not to assume the worse - beg with every bone in my body that everything's okay - but images of Hiccup's lifeless body from my earlier dreams haunt me as I draw closer and closer to the tent. I try not to think of Emma, but it's hard not to.

I can't lose him. I've already lost her, and I just can't stand the



thought of losing another person, especially if it's him.

My question is answered when I finally arrive to the corner of the tent. Firstly, there isn't any blood, unlike during my race, so that's a relief in itself. Secondly, both Hiccup and Lout are both healthily standing, their bikes both in one piece beside them.

"Hiccup, what's going on?" Astrid demands, moving away from my side and towards the two, an urgent sense in her step.

Hiccup and Lout turn at the sound of her sudden voice, both clearly surprised to see her there. Her original target had been towards Hiccup, but she quickly changes her route before she can get to him. Instead, she decides to focus all of her attention towards Lout, her stance suddenly becoming more hostile.

"What did you do?" she hisses at him. "I swear, Lout, if you hurt him, I'll--"

"Astrid, wait!" Hiccup reaches out and grabs her arm as she passes him.

"What are you--"

"He didn't do anything, okay? We were just talking."

"What? \_Why\_?"

I decide to finally speak up, since my heartbeats gone back to a steady pace and I don't feel like there's a knot caught in my throat anymore. "Hiccup, what's going on?" I ask.

All three of them stop and look over towards me, but it's Hiccup that holds my stare. He looks awestruck to see me, which is a bit confusing, since I know he knew I was here watching the race. His shock though then turns into a firm nod, like he's telling me he's happy to see I'm here for support. I nearly melt in my place, since I'm honestly just happy to see he's okay.

"We're not gonna finish the race," Hiccup tells the two of us with this authoritative tone.

"Not gonnaâ€¦| you mean you're calling a \_draw?"\_ Astrid asks, sounding stunned at this turn out.

"Yes. We're calling a draw."

"What's a draw?" I ask.

Lout looks baffled at what must be an elementary question, and Hiccup appears like he's about to explain, but Astrid cuts him off before he can. "But no one's called a draw since, likeâ€¦| well, I honestly can't remember the last time someone called a draw." She sends him a weary look, her earlier aggression disappearing completely from her eyes. "Are you sure you wanna--"

"He said it's a draw, alright?" Lout speaks up, sounding annoyed.

"Yeah, I heard, \_thanks\_," Astrid throws back, sending him an equally annoyed glare.

"Butâ€¦ how are you going to know who's the better racer if you guys are calling a, uhâ€¦ a draw?" I ask. "I mean, that's what this whole race was about, right? To see who's better."

He sends me this smile I can't read. "No, not exactly."

Astrid gives him a suspicious look. "What do you mean 'not exactly'?"

"Does it matter?" Lout asks, his round face beginning to turn a deep, crimson red; I can't tell if it's the kind of red that come along with animosity or embarrassment though. "We're callin' a draw and that's that. You should be happy, since that means I'm not gonna have to slaughter your little boyfriend here in order to win."

The aggression from before suddenly reenters Astrid eyes as she turn towards the larger boy. "Lout, you may not've hurt Hiccup, but I swear, if you push me, I will \_not\_ hesitate to punch your teeth in."

"How is everything going over there?" a voice I instantly recognize as Fish calls out, breaking through the tension. "Is everyone alright? Do we needa call 911 or somethin'?"

I'm the one that heads back to where I can see where everyone else is still standing around, waiting to hear what exactly is going on with the two racers. I raise my hand into the air to get Fish's attention and call out, "No, everyone's fine! We'll be right there!"

"Is everyone still up there?" Lout asks me as I make my way back over towards them.

I nod.

A cast of discomfort comes over his face as I say this. He turns urgently towards Hiccup and asks, in a hushed voice, like he doesn't want Astrid and me to hear, "What are we gonna tell 'em?"

"We're gonna tell 'em the truth," Hiccup plainly states without missing a beat. He then peels off his right hand's glove and reaches it out towards Lout, letting it hover there between them, waiting for something. I think I've seen someone do this before, but I can't remember what it's called or what it implies.

Lout looks down at Hiccup's hand hesitantly, licking his lips as he studies it. He then peels off his own right hand's glove and meets it with Hiccup's much smaller one, the two of them smacking together as they shake.

"Don't think this doesn't mean I'm not gonna mess with ya anymore though, alright, Haddock?" Lout laughs as the two release hands and he goes back to get his bike. "We may have this understandin' between us now, but that doesn't mean things are gonna change."

Hiccup lets out a sigh, though I do notice that there's a smile on his tired, freckled face. "I wouldn't expect any less from you, Lout."

We all make our ways back up the starting line, the murmur of the crowd growing louder and louder with each step we take. Lout doesn't seem phased by any of it as he wheels his bike beside him, but Hiccup definitely does. I don't say anything to comfort him, though I want to, since it appears that he's deep in thought.

Ruff is the first to speak up once we arrive back at the starting line. "Come on, guys! What gives?" she groans, a bunch of the other kids seeming to agree with her on the matter.

"Yeah, what gives?" I hear Cami repeat, making her way up to Hiccup's side. "Did you guys get inna fight or something? 'Cause, if you did, I'm gonna be really upset, since I really wanted to be there to help kick his butt with you."

Astrid stifles back a laugh as Tooth comes over and shushes the young girl. Lout just looks a little irritated as the twins don't even try to hide their amusement.

"No, there wasn't any fighting," Hiccup assures her with a laugh, reaching out his hand and ruffling her hair. "Everything's good here." He then goes into explaining to the curious crowd what had happened while they had been down on the track, unseen by any of our eyes. As soon as he says the word "draw", he seems to lose the attention of a couple of them, a few even going as far as to just wander off before he's even finished. None of it seems to bother Hiccup though.

Once he's done explaining, the crowd that had once been finally disburses, people either seeming upset at the outcome to the race or pretty indifferent. I'm honestly just glad it's all over.

"Well, I guess we should all head out then," Fish suggests with a satisfied grin on his round face as Lout and the twins head off to their own cars.

Cami sniffs Hiccup's hair and draws back, pretending to let out a horrid gag. "And you needa take a shower too. Gah! You smell like a wet dog, Burp."

Astrid laughs, which causes Hiccup to let out a sigh. "What would I ever do without you, Cami?"

"You'd probably be dead."

"True."

Tooth volunteers to take Hiccup's bike back to Fish's car to load it up, and Cami's set on being able to ride on the handlebars the entire way back. As they all start heading towards the gated exit, going on about where we should all go to "celebrate" Hiccup's victory, I notice that said Hiccup is missing. Looking back, I see that he's lagging behind everyone else, probably the exhaustion of everything that had just happened catching up to him.

"Hey," I go once I'm at his side.

He looks up at me, a tired grin on his face. "Hey."

Without thinking, I move forward and wrap his small frame into the biggest hug I can manage. I feel him tense up under my touch, but after a second, he eventually relaxes, even allowing his own arms to wrap around my back.

"I'm really glad you're okay," I tell him.

I can feel his smile through my shirt. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm glad I'm okay too. Though, admittedly, my leg does kinda hurt. So there's that."

I laugh, releasing him from the hug. "Do you need to go oil it or something?"

"Jack, you are aware that it cuts off below my knee, right?"

I pause and look down at his prosthetic leg. "Soooâ€¦ no oiling?"

"Nope. No oiling. But if there's anything I need right now, it's a chocolate milkshake from The Ring. What'd you say, buddy? Care to join me?"

I let out a laugh and a smile, and it feels slightly weird, but great at the same time. It's been so long since I've really genuinely smiled and laughed at something - since I've genuinely been happy - but here he is, Hiccup, alive and in one piece, right in front of me, asking me to get a milkshake with him while wearing that goofy, crooked toothed smile of his.

"Sure. And I'll buy this time."

## 19. It Wasn't That Bad, Was It?

**\*\*Well, here we are guys.\*\***

This is the last chapter. I hope I was able to give you guys (and the boys) the closure you all deserved.

Ah man, where do I even start. You guys are so great. Like, the updating schedule for this thing got so whacked up half way through, and though I'm sure I lost a handful of readers because of it, those of you that have stuck with me this entire time are truly amazing human beings. And patient. Can't forget that, that's really important.

So, thank you. Thank every single one of you for reading and, if you did, reviewing. I appreciated every ounce of support I got, be it in fanart or word or just thought form. Writing this fic was definitely a crazy ride, and though it took a lot longer than I had hoped, I'm glad I decided to see it through to the end.

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"I can't believe that's the last time I'll ever have to hold a pair of hedge clippers."

We're both sitting in Fish's still nacho infested car after our last day of having to work as Gobber's lawn maintenance summer slaves. He's behind the wheel and I'm seated beside him; our usual spots. My house is visible just outside the rolled down window, my dad's and Bertha's cars parked side by side in the driveway.

"There's always next summer," I remind him.

His baseball capped head turns quickly in my direction, a concerned look in his wide, dark eyes. "Wait. Are you seriously considering-"

"Gods, Fish, I'm joking," I tell him through a laugh, reaching over and unbuckling my seatbelt. "I hope today was the last time I ever have to push a lawn mower. I am so indescribably sick of those things."

A sense of relief seems to come over him, his tense shoulders and horror stricken expression both relaxing and softening at my reassurance.

"Okay. Good," he goes. "Because if you were gonna do it next year, then that means I would have to too, and I'm not too sure I'm down with that."

"Oh yeah? And why would you have to do it again too?"

"Because, if I didn't, you'd be paired up with one of the other guys and-"

"Yeah, okay, point taken."

"Admit it," he says with a smug grin. "You need me. I'm like your big, dependable bodyguard."

"As much as it pains me to admit, yes, you totally are." I reach over and push the car door open, turning in my seat and stepping out onto the curb. After shutting the door behind me, I lean over to look at him again through the opened window. "Though I'm pretty sure one day I'll be taller than you, so don't be too sad when I don't need your protection anymore, alright?"

He gives me a knowing nod. "I'll try my best."

"See ya Monday, Fish."

I hear the sound of his car leaving the curb and traveling down the street as I walk up to the front door and let myself in. I half expect the house to be empty as I enter - like I'm used to it being - but, of course, I'm wrong. It's virtually impossible for the house to be at complete peace anymore.

Firstly, the television's on, my dad sitting in his usual armchair as he watches what sounds like a baseball game. Bertha is reclined on the adjacent couch, leaning against the arm rest with a book in hand. She mouths the words as she reads them in her head, her eyes flicking back and forth across the page.

My dad's the first to notice me.

"Ah, you're home early," is his greeting as he turns down the volume on the television. "I assumed you'd go out to lunch with your Ingerman friend. We've all already eaten."

"That's fine." I slip off my dirty sneakers, throw them into the closet under the stairs, and make my way into the kitchen to raid the fridge for something to eat.

"How was work?" I hear Bertha asks, using her finger as a placeholder on her book.

I open the fridge and take out the leftovers from last night's dinner: overly sloppy joes - a Gobber creation. At least I'm wearing a shirt I don't necessarily care for, because eating this could have the potential of ending badly, stain wise.

"It was alright," I tell her, taking out a plate from the cupboard overhead. "I almost ran over Mrs Iverson's dog again, but y'know. I'm honestly just happy it's finally over."

"Oh, right. Today was your last day," I hear my dad think out loud.

"Going from being a part-time blue collar worker to a full-time student," Bertha adds with a smile. "You must be pumped."

I roll my eyes. "Ecstatic."

Bertha and Cami have been hanging out around our house a lot lately; not that I'm complaining. At first, it was kind of weird coming home from work or from being out with Fish or Jack or Astrid to see these two faces I'm not used to seeing every day. It's gotten easier though, especially since they've been staying for lunch and dinner more and more often.

As my dad's gone back to watching his game, Bertha's gone back to her book, and I'm pouring myself a drink, Cami makes her usual dramatic entrance. She bounds down the stairs singing some song I'm sure she's making up on spot, her more-tangled-than-ever hair flying every which way behind her. As she jumps over the last step and onto the wooden floor of the living room, I notice an annoyed looking Toothless dangling from her arms.

"You really shouldn't carry him like that," I warn her, leaving the kitchen with my food and drink and taking a seat on the couch opposite her mom. "He looks like he's contemplating a plan in which he claws your eyes out."

The small blonde looks briefly down at the cat dangling from her crossed arms. Despite the fact that I hear the little creature let out a low growl of disapproval, Cami doesn't look at all concerned.

"If he tries to claw out my eyes, I'll poop in his litter box," she tells me matter-of-factly.

Bertha lets out a groan as I hear my dad try to mask his chuckle with a heavy cough.

"Oh, don't groan at me, Mother," Cami goes.\*\*\_ ".\_\*\*It's called 'showing dominance' and it's a very important key element in any human-animal relationship." She waddles up to the couch, Toothless still suspended in her arms, and plops herself down with a bounce right in between me and her mom. "Burp here has neglected this key element, and now this cat walks all over him. It's really pathetic, isn't it Toothless?"

Toothless lets out another low growl in response.

Cami looks towards me. "He agrees, in case you don't speak Catanese."

I take a bite out of my sloppy joe. "I speak Catanese."

It's then that Cami lets her poor, furry victim go. Without a second of hesitation, Toothless quickly jumps from the unwanted grasp and into what he knows is my safe lap. Having found sanctuary there, he curls into a ball and begins to vibrate.

"Cami, come on," Bertha says, her finger once again marking her place in her book. "We're still qualified as guests here. Let's at least try and be nice to our hosts."

"Well, she isn't lying," I admit. "Toothless is a spoiled brat that walks all over me."

Toothless, right on cue, lets out yet another low growl that I can feel on my thighs, his bushy tail coming up and flicking me in the face as a comeback.

Cami reaches out and strokes his back, causing his hostile growl to turn into a satisfied purr. "I like your style, cat," she compliments him.

Once I've managed to down my sloppy joe without making a mess of any kind - Cami was an obstacle to get around, since she repeatedly tried to flip the messy plate into my face while I was eating off of it - I wash my dishes, then go to get my sneakers from the closet. My dad notices as I lace them up.

"Where ya headed, son?" he asks as I stand up.

"I promised Jack I'd hang out with him today."

"Why are you always hanging out with Jack?" Cami lets out in a groan, leaning over the back of the couch all dramatic like. She sticks her arms out in front of me so that I can't get by and to the door leading out to the garage. "Is he your booooyfriend or something?"

"What? No," I tell her, lifting her arms out of my way. "He's just my best friend."

"Yeah, suuure he is."

"Cami, stop it," Bertha tells her daughter with a tone.

"Well, I was thinking we could do something this afternoon together," my dad goes on before I can start defending myself against Cami's

accusation and thank Bertha for backing me up. "You know. As a group. Just the four of us."

"But Dad, I promised him," I explain, trying to stress the promise part. The last time I broke a promise with Jack, he ended up getting knocked off a bike, having a seizure, and nearly dying. I'm not allowing that to happen again - even if the chances of something that tragic happening again is, I'll admit, a little extreme.

"I know, but Bertha and Cami are here to see the both of us, not just me." He has a look in his eye that tells me he's not going to budge. "The least you can do is-"

"Oh, Stoick, let the boy go be with his friend," Bertha interrupts. "School starts on Monday. Let him have his last days of freedom." She turns to look over the back of the couch at me, my hand resting on the garage door's doorknob. A small, encouraging smile appears on her face, a wink following it.

I can tell my dad doesn't want to let me go, but I can also tell he doesn't want to say no to Bertha when she's made it clearly obvious that she doesn't mind me going out. He reaches up to hold the bridge of his nose and lets out a sigh.

"Fine," he gives in. "Just be home for dinner, alright?"

"I'm making shepherd's pie," Bertha sings.

"In that case, you don't have to worry," I tell them both. "I'll be here for the shepherd's pie."

Cami follows me into the garage, asking, "Can I come with you?" as I make a beeline to my bike resting on its rack. "I've been stuck inside all day and Toothless is getting boring. I wanna go search for dragons or destroy something."

"Not today," I tell her, slipping on my fingerless gloves. "Jack told me he already has something planned."

"Like what?"

"I dunno. He wouldn't tell me."

"That's stupid."

"You can bring it up with him next time he comes over."

"I will."

Lifting my bike down from its rack and mounting the saddle, Cami goes on to ask, "Well, when you get back, can we do something fun and destructive? I know we can't leave the house because it'll be dark and our parents are stupid like that, but we could maybe make some super awesome swords out of those wrapping paper rolls in your dad's closet and gang up on them. They'd never see it comin'."

"That's actually a pretty good idea," I tell her. "They'll be expecting us to attack after dinner though, so make the swords while I'm gone. That way we can be prepared and get them when they least expect it."



Cami's eyes beam, a toothy smile on her face as she places her hands on her hips. "Wow. I've really taught you well, haven't I?"

I reach out and ruffle her hair. "Don't attack without me. I wanna be there to see their faces."

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The sun is almost unbearable. It's beating onto the back of my neck and head, like it's trying to burn a hole right through me. The icy lemonade in my hand though - provided by the lemonade master, Jamie Bennett himself - helps keep me safe and at a reasonable temperature.

I'm seated on the Bennett's front porch, my legs stretched out over my backpack filled with the supplies Hiccup and I will be needing for today. Sophie and Baby Tooth play out in front of me, both of them pretending to be, of course, fairies, neither seeming to be affected by the torturous heat. I don't know how little kids do it, but I'm infinitely jealous.

Jamie is seated on the steps beside me, skimming through one of his colorful comic books. Tooth is on my other side, stringing together two brightly colored candy necklaces for the girls.

"What time is it?" I ask.

Tooth laughs under her breath, not bothering to look up from her project. "Jack, you \_just\_ asked me that a minute ago."

"Soooâ€¦ 12:27?"

"Seeing as it was 12:26 just a moment ago, yes, I believe that would make it 12:27."

I let out a deep sigh and lay back on the porch, resting my lemonade on my stomach and my head on one of my arms. The porch happens to be made of concrete, so its chill surface helps with keeping me cool through my thin shirt.

"He'll be here soon, Jack. Don't worry," Tooth tells me sweetly. I feel her delicate fingers brush up against my knee for a moment, then go back to her candy necklace making. The touch, more than likely meant to be a gesture of comfort, seems to work; I suddenly feel a little less weighed down.

It's approximately 12:38 when I hear the sound of bike tires against asphalt.

I spring to life, my gaze darting over towards the dirt road across the open yard. I had been right to assume someone on a bike had arrived, but I isn't the person I assumed it would be.

Astrid shouts a "hey!" towards us as she dismounts her baby blue bike, little Sophie and Baby Tooth both darting in her direction with

open arms. Tooth waves back, and I let out a groan and fall back onto the porch again.

"Don't act so happy to see me, Overland," Astrid quips, Sophie now in her arms as she walks over to join us.

"He's waiting for Hiccup to show up," Jamie says beside me, not even looking up from his comic book. "He said he'd be here at 12:15, but he hasn't arrived yet."

"Yep, that's sounds like Hiccup alright," Astrid laughs. "He's good at being fashionable late."

"This is really late though," I mumble. "Even for his standards."

"Oh, don't overthink it. He'll get here. Eventually."

The blonde takes a seat on the ground beside Tooth, Sophie now resting snug in her lap. Baby Tooth goes on to ask if she can rebraid Astrid's hair, to which she humbly accepts. That leads to Sophie wanting to have her hair braided, so Astrid goes and does that. Jamie eventually has to get up from beside me and sacrifice himself so his little sister will stop crying about not having someone's hair to braid, considering Tooth's too busy making candy necklaces and I don't have enough hair to braid in the first place. In the end, we have a little braid train going, half the people in it not seeming to know what they're doing - mostly Sophie though, who's just throwing Jamie's hair this way and that while giggling up a storm.

Hiccup finally arrives around the time all the braiding has been done. He looks tired as he gets off his bike and starts wheeling it towards us, but a smile appears on his face nonetheless.

"You guys havin' a braiding party?" he asks.

"You know it," Astrid smiles up at him. "Want one?"

"Uh, I don't think I have enough hair."

"Nonsense." The blonde waves him over, prompting him to take a seat beside her. "Come here, Haddock. Let's see what I can do with that pathetic mop on your head."

Hiccup looks desperately towards me, and I take that as my cue to step in. "Actually, we have somewhere to be." Grabbing my backpack and getting up from the porch, I head over towards where I parked my bike, leaning against the side of the house.

"Like what?" Jamie asks, his eyes following me. I can tell by the way he asks that he's hoping he'll have an excuse to leave with us, so he can get away from all the girly hair braiding.

"Yeah. Like what?" Astrid and Tooth both ask in unison.

I'm about to tell them the truth - though the truth is honestly a little embarrassing and hard to explain - but Hiccup beats me to the punch by saying, "Like important guy stuff, that's what. You wouldn't understand."

Tooth laughs, Jamie says, "But I am a guy!", and Astrid rolls her eyes and goes back to messing with Sophie's hair.

"We'll only be gone for a little while," I assure them, looking specifically at Jamie's crestfallen face. Hating to see the forlorn in his eyes about not being able to tag along with us guys, I add, "Maybe we can get out the slip'n'slide after we get back. Have a little slip'n'slide party."

Not only does Jamie's face light up in excitement at the idea of a slip'n'slide party, but so does Sophie's and Baby Tooth's. I look over at Tooth for permission, though I doubt she can really say no at this point.

"That sounds like a great idea," Tooth agrees with a sweet smile. She looks back up at me. "I'll be sure to have them all in their bathing suits by the time you guys get back, okay?"

"Alright, sounds good."

"Have fun doin' your guy stuff," Astrid calls to us as we get on our bikes. "Whatever that means."

"Oh, trust me. We will," Hiccup throws back at her.

I want to point out to Hiccup that their playful banter could be misinterpreted as flirting, since Tooth told me that's something that couples or people that have feelings for each other do. By the way Hiccup's smiling like crazy as we kick off and start biking down the graveled road though, I can tell he already knows this.

"So, mind telling me where we're going?" he asks once we've left the proximities of the Bennett's front yard, thus the ear shots of the kids and the girls. "And what's inside the backpack. Mostly what's inside the backpack though. I'm curious."

I feel like filling him in, but I decide not to. Not yet.

"It's a surprise," I tell him instead.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it better be a good surprise. It's hot out and that lemonade you had back there looked really good and I want some as soon as we get back, so let's make this fast."

We bike farther down the graveled street, passed my house and towards the outskirts of the nearby woods. Eventually we arrive at the head of a very familiar trail, trees and shrubs acting as barriers on either side.

"Are we gonna ditch our bikes?" Hiccup asks.

I nod. "It won't take long to get there on foot."

"Get where?"

"To- hey. Don't try to trick me into telling you where we're going."

That's cheating."

"Dang it," Hiccup goes, snapping his finger at his foiled plan. "And I really thought I had you there."

We rest our bikes up against some nearby trees, me keeping my backpack firmly on my back as we start heading towards the trailhead. I can tell Hiccup is eager to ask what's inside the pack again, but he decides to keep that question to himself.

I led him unhurriedly up the same trail that Tooth and I had ventured through the first time we went into these woods together. Neither of us are wearing the proper shoe wear, Hiccup in his old, torn up sneakers and me in a pair of flimsy flip flops. I nearly stub my toes against a huge boulder when he tries to surprise attack me from behind, attempting to get a hold of my backpack to see what's inside it, which leads to a frantic chase. He's never able to catch me though, since his prosthetic gives him some trouble, to which he curses me for. I go back and help him up the rest of the way after he swears on his mom's grave that he won't try to get into my backpack again.

We eventually come to the opening overlooking Berk. Judging by his awed expression, I don't think Hiccup's even been up here before.

"Dude, this is so \_cool\_," I hear him breathe, taking a seat on a nearby rock. As I slip off my backpack and unzip it on the ground, he inspects his leg, making sure all the joints are still intact. "How'd you find it? I mean, I've lived here my entire \_life\_ and never knew this place existed."

"Tooth showed it to me," I tell him. I reach into the backpack and pull out two small hand shovels, both loaned to me by my mother. Alongside them, I pull out a pearl white pair of and worn ice skates, the single silver blades on each glistening a bit in the beaming sun.

Hiccup looks up from his leg and scrunches up his freckled face when he sees me holding these seemingly strange objects. "Is that the stuff that as in your backpack?"

"Yep."

"Really? Man, all that energy earlier wasted for nothing. I'm disappointed."

"Hahaâ€¦ yeah." I look nervously down at the skates. "Listenâ€¦ this is going to be a littleâ€¦ well, it may be a little strange."

Hiccup smirks. "But that's not new for you, is it?"

That manages to get a laugh out of me, which I'm thankful for, since I didn't like the hollow feeling that had begun to form in my chest by looking at the skates. "Well, no, I guess not," I confess, not bothering to fight back a smile. "But, uhâ€¦ I justâ€¦ I guess what I'm trying to say is that I want you to hear me out before, you knowâ€¦ calling me out for being weird."

The smirk on Hiccup's face disappears then, probably because he can

hear and see the seriousness in my voice and eyes. "Yeah, of course," he tells me. "What's up?"

I walk over and take a seat beside him on the boulder, resting the shovels and skates in my lap. That entire morning I had been trying to plan out how I was going to explain this all to him in my head, but now that we're here, I can't seem to quite remember where I decided I would start.

I guess I could start with the skates.

"These skates were Emma's," I tell him, forcing myself to say her name in a steady voice. "Apparently we used to go ice skating a lot during the winters back home. Like, our old home. My dad told me I was the one that taught her and that we were both pretty good at it." I stop and eye the skates again, both starting to feel heavy somehow. I can feel Hiccup look briefly down at them too, like he's taking in their new meaning, then back up at me. I continue. "They're the only things they kept of hers. Everything else was donated or sold because they didn'tâ€¦ they didn't want to have to look at it and remember.

"They kept these skates though. I don't know why, but they did. They buried them in one of the boxes of unpacked stuff in the spare room next to mine, and they decided to give them to me just a couple of weeks ago. I don't know what they expect me to do with them, seeing as they're too tiny for me, but, uhâ€¦ I don't know. I put them on my shelf at first - you know, as something to remember her by - but the thing isâ€¦ I don't thinkâ€¦ I don't think I really \_want\_ to remember her right now. Like, I know that sounds awful, butâ€¦ it's justâ€¦ justâ€¦"

"It's too soon," Hiccup finishes for me when I can't.

I nod. "Yeah. The wound is still somewhat fresh, and just \_looking\_ at these and \_knowing\_ that they were hers and that she isn't here anymoreâ€¦ it hurts.

"And I guess that's where the shovels come in. I read somewhere that, when someone dies, they usually bury the body. Andâ€¦ geez, this sounds so stupid, but I was thinkingâ€¦ wellâ€¦ I wasn't able to go to her funeral, since I was still in that coma and everything soâ€¦ you knowâ€¦ I was thinking-

"You wanna bury the skates?"

I nod, not being able to tear my eyes from the white, bladed shoes. The threat of tears becomes apparent on the rims of my eyes, but I fight it. Instead I laugh, looking up at Hiccup and saying, "Yeah. Is that weird?"

He pauses, looks up and studies me for a moment with those green-yellow eyes, then says, "No, not really. I mean, it makes sense. You want closure since you weren't able to get it at her funeral, and this is your way of getting it. Now, people don't typically \_bury\_ stuff of the deceased when they don't want it anymore, but even with that being said, I don't think it's that weird. Different, but not weird."

Looking at him, I can't help but smile at his encouraging words,

trying to get my thanks through to him with my eyes.

He smiles back, telling me he understands, then reaches out for one of the shovels. "Well, of all places to bury them, you sure did pick the perfect spot. I mean, just \_look \_at this view. I wouldn't half mind being buried here myself, to be honest."

We decide on a place to bury the skates - close to the edge, but not too close, beside the weird head-shaped rock - and then start digging away at the earth. Working side by side in silence, we manage to create a small hole big enough to rest both skates on top of each other, a pile of uplifted dirt gathered neatly beside the sight. As I gather said skates from the rock I left them on, Hiccup goes off towards a nearby shrub and starts picking up what looks like tiny, stray twigs from around it. By the time I arrive back with the skates in hand, he's managed to arrange the collection of twigs to spell out EMMA right above the open pocket in the ground.

I had been fighting back tears this entire time - mostly for Hiccup's sake - but it's at seeing her name that I finally let myself break. The sob comes out before I can even register it and I can hear the skate's blades clink together in my shaking hands.

Without a word, Hiccup gets up from his crotched position beside the hole and comes towards me. I feel his firm hand touch my shoulder, the grip of his fingers telling me that he's here.

I reach up and wipe my eyes with my arm, trying to sniff as quietly as possible. "I'm sorry," I tell him, my voice cracking with the words. "Iâ€¦ I justâ€¦"

"No, no, no, Jack, it's okay," he assures me, the touch of his hand still present on my shoulder. "This is what people do at funerals. They cry. It's \_okay\_ to cry."

I nod my head because I know any type of verbal response will come out completely unable to be understood by human. He takes the skates from my tremble hands when he sees I can't get myself to move, and gently does the honors of laying them in the hole, one neatly placed on the other.

He stands again and looks towards me. "You have anything you want to say?"

I sniff. "Huh?"

"At funerals, before they bury the body, sometimes people go up and, like, talk about the person. Or to the person. Depends on the type of ceremony, I guess."

Looking down at the skates, I decide to say the first thing that comes to mind.

"I wish you could be here, Emma. Andâ€¦ and I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what happened to you, even ifâ€¦ even if it wasn't my fault."

I notice Hiccup smile out of the corner of my eye.

"I miss you and love you and I hope, wherever you are, that you're happy and safe andâ€¦ I just want you to be safe."

The tears are threatening to attack the rims of my eyes again, so I stop while I'm ahead. Hiccup seems to understand I'm done with my small eulogy, so he passes me a shovel as I wipe my eyes again. We both get onto our knees and fill in the hole, the dirt making the skates disappear with each shovel full until it's eventually gone from sight.

"You feel any better?" Hiccup asks me as I stash the dirty shovels back into my backpack once we're done.

I can't really tell what I'm feeling; it's an odd mixture of sadness, but also relief - like a weight's been released, but not all of it, so it's still there, heavy and aching.

"A little," I tell him. "Is there anything you want to bury too? You know. Of your mom's?"

The question seems to catch him by surprise. He looks over at the small mound of dirt with the twigs laid out above it, his eyes seeming to be studying the structure, deep in thought.

"Nah," he finally says, shaking his head and turning away from the grave. "I've done enough burying with her. I think it's time I started digging things up, y'know?"

I nod, though I don't completely understand. That's alright though. Maybe one day I will.

We stick around for a little while longer, looking out over Berk and admiring the mountains and the ocean. The time is almost 1:30 when Hiccup tells me we should probably start heading back down, especially if we still plan on having the slip'n'slide party that I promised the kids.

The walk back to our bikes is gracious. With every step I take farther away from Emma's "grave", the less heavy my heart seems to feel. Hiccup doesn't bring her up as we make our trek down the hill, which I'm grateful for. In exchange, I don't bring up his mom, though I get the feeling he's made a lot of progress with moving on from her death lately, so it probably wouldn't matter. Instead, he asks me about my new psychologist and how my weekly sessions with her are going. I tell him things are going fine and that we now know that the cause behind me seeing Emma and having strange nightmares is actually posttraumatic stress caused by the accident. Though "Emma" doesn't appear to me anymore - and hasn't since I found out the truth - the nightmares still occur, though not as much. Through a series of different types of therapies and medication though, I'm expected to stop seeing things and start feeling better before I get too far into the school year.

"Speaking of which," Hiccup says as we reach the trailhead, the sun momentarily blinding us as we step out from under the canopied trees. "How you feelin' about the whole school thing? I know you were excited about it earlier in the summer, but now that we start next week, you havin' any second thoughts?"

"Not second thoughts," I tell him genuinely. "I guess I'm just a little nervous. It's such a foreign concept to me, \_school\_. Honestly, I don't really know where to begin."

"Well, have you bought school supplies yet?"

"Yeah, I went shopping with my mom the other day. I don't really know what to do with any of it though."

"Dude, I can come over and help if you want," Hiccup suggests as we mount our bikes. "There's really nothing to it. Just gotta label your binders and make sure you have enough pencils. You know, stuff like that. Have you walked your schedule yet?"

We both kick off and start pedaling slowly back towards the Bennett's and my house. "Have I what?"

"Walked your schedule. Your class schedule."

I shake my head. "That's something you're supposed to do?"

"Well, no, not really," he admits. "It helps a lot with findin' classes the first day though. And the fact that you've never stepped foot in the high school before gives you even more of a reason to go do it."

"Are you going to walk your schedule?" As we pass by my house, I can hear the distant laughter of what sounds like Baby Tooth and Jamie, the colorful, plastic surface of the slip'n'slide able to be seen from where we're gliding side by side.

"Yeah. Fish and I were gonna do it tomorrow afternoon. You wanna join us? We can show you all the shortcuts and stuff."

"Shortcuts?"

"Yeah, like, easier and quicker ways to get around."

"Oh, \_shortcuts.\_ But are those considered cheating?"

Hiccup laughs. "Not in this context, no. Though, if you can cheat the school system, I say go for it."

"I get the feeling you don't really like school."

"Trust me, dude. Once you get there, you'll understand where I'm coming from."

We eventually arrive back at the Bennett's and are greeted by Baby Tooth and Sophie, both sporting their swimsuits and sopping wet. I cave and take Sophie's embrace as she wraps her wet arms around my legs, pretending to fall down at her grasp and calling out to Tooth, who's laughing from the front porch, to avenge me. Hiccup has different plans and bolts towards the front door to find sanctuary inside, Baby Tooth trailing after him as fast as her little legs will let her. Jamie and Astrid, who had both been hiding in the bushes, team up and take Hiccup down before he can reach the front porch, Astrid even going as far as to drench him with the hose she has wielded behind her.

When the lot of them are done harassing us, we're both soaked head to toe, our clothes sticking to our bodies and dripping with enough



water to probably fill a pool.

"It's weird," Hiccup goes, both of us sitting on the steps of the porch, our dripping shirts hanging from the porch railing to dry. "I really thought this summer was gonna suck, y'know? But I guess not. This summer was actually pretty fun." He punches me playfully in the shoulder, giving me a smirk. "I guess I have you to thank for that, ya big dork."

I laugh. "Yeah. It wasn't that bad, was it?"

End  
file.